CHAN (ZEN) SICKNESS AND THE MASTER'S ROLE IN ITS DIAGNOSIS, TREATMENT, AND PREVENTION

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of

The California Institute of Integral Studies

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy and Religion

California Institute of Integral Studies

San Francisco, CA

2012

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation thoroughly investigates a wide range of Buddhist and psychological literature in order to situate *Chan sickness* (aka *Zen sickness* or *meditation sickness*) properly in the Buddhist lexicon. Initially, it examines the writings of Chan patriarchs and portions of three sutras closely associated with Chinese Buddhism, in order to understand how *Chan sickness* is addressed in Chan literature. Next, it examines how contemporary psychologists who employ Buddhist meditation as an adjunct to therapy view difficulties experienced by meditators who may have underlying issues, in an attempt to determine what underlying psychological factors can trigger *meditation sickness*. By means of a research questionnaire circulated to meditation teachers at Chan and Zen centers across the United States, a phenomenological-qualitative analysis of the survey results discusses the current thinking on *Chan sickness* in contemporary Chan and Zen practice.

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Conventions of Usage

Throughout this dissertation, the following abbreviations are employed:

1. AOF = Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana Sutra

2. SCE/SPE = Sutra of Complete Enlightenment/Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment

3. SUR = Surangama Sutra

4. Ch. = Chinese

5. Jp. = Japanese

6. Skt. = Sanskrit

7. WG = Wade-Giles Chinese Romanization

8. PY = pinyin Chinese Romanization

9. Chan (fr. WG: Ch'an) equivalent to Zen (Jp.), both derived from *dhyana* (Skt.), meaning meditation. Throughout, I use *Chan sickness, Zen sickness* and *meditation sickness* to represent the same condition(s).

10. *Zazen*, or Zen meditation, chiefly open-eyed sitting meditation that may begin with counting of breaths to help the meditator concentrate on being in the present moment, "just sitting."

11. Meditation = as described in this dissertation, chiefly Chan/Zen meditation, though other forms of meditation and mindfulness are employed by some of the authors cited herein, including *vipassana*/insight meditation, Transcendental Meditation, Mantra Meditation, Kabbalah Meditation, Sufi Meditation, Dzogchen Meditation, or Chakra Meditation.

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Acknowledgments

Loving thanks to my Mother, Ruth Johns Nelson, for her emphasis on education, both as a parent and in her chosen career as a public schoolteacher for more than 30 years. I couldn't have done this without you!

Much appreciation to friends who never stopped encouraging me to finish: Kate Donohue, Cyndi Saint, Therese Guise, Paul Walker, Phil McKown, Nancy Slichenmyer Weissler, Andrew Antis, Cheryl Parker-Matthews, Kate Dittrick, Fr. John Porter, and Fr. Paul Burrows.

Thank you to the many educators who have made learning meaningful in my life: Carl Dawson, Helen Shelton Carey, Helen Templeton, Jan Hofts, Sally Schwegman, Juliann Samuels, Jim Calvert, Julie Shaw, Sam Rhinesmith, Richard Dennis, Donald Lord, George Screes, Br. Donald Mouton, Br. James Clifton, Judy Mosher, Jack Hasted, Susan Marcus, James L. Enyeart, Frank Pagano, Krishnan Venkatesh, Linda Wiener, Ralph Swentzell, Yi Wu, Steven Goodman, and Rina Sircar.

With gratitude to all the institutions that have contributed to my educational career: Indianapolis Public Schools, Washington Township Schools (Indianapolis), Butler University, Indiana University-Bloomington, New York University, International Academy of Merchandising and Design-Chicago, Northwestern University-Chicago & Evanston, College of Santa Fe, St. John's College-Santa Fe, and California Institute of Integral Studies.

To the many information centers that have contributed to my knowledge bank and my book collection: Rockefeller Library at California Institute of

Integral Studies, Innerlight Books-CIIS, San Francisco Public Library, Google Scholar, St. John's College Bookstore, Books Inc.-San Francisco, City Lights Bookstore, amazon.com, alibris.com.

Much appreciation goes to the co-researchers, meditation teachers across the United States, who very kindly participated in my survey detailed herein. I could not have completed this project without your generous support. Bless you.

I am grateful to Therese Guise for proofreading and editing suggestions.

Special acknowledgment to my technical reviewer for this dissertation, Candice Chase.

And finally, a special thank you to all those who have inspired me with writings and lectures on Buddhism, as well as writings on writing, especially: His Holiness The Dalai Lama, Alan W. Watts, Master Sheng-yen, Thomas Cleary, Burton Watson, John McRae, Peter Hershock, Bernie Glassmann, Joan Halifax, Kazuaki Tanahashi, Thich Nhat Hanh, Erica Jong, Shirley MacLaine, Natalie Goldberg, Julia Cameron, Amy Gutman, Dr. Wayne W. Dyer, Pema Chodron, and Allison B. Miller.

Preface

In *The Wise Heart: A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology,* meditation teacher and psychologist Jack Kornfield describes a retreat wherein a meditation student experienced painful difficulties brought about by the intense meditation regimen:

> Mitch, who came to a meditation retreat, had a long, painful history. At age four his gambler father abandoned the family and was replaced by a stepfather who physically and sexually abused all three children. By high school Mitch had begun a serious drug habit to numb his pain. His older sister had been in and out of the mental hospital. In twelve-step groups Mitch had found enough support to finish college and develop a career as a software engineer. Now Mitch was married and had two children of his own. Reading about Buddhism, Mitch found that the systematic approach to inner life appealed to his technical intelligence. Although the first few retreats he attended were difficult and he experienced a lot of restlessness, he persisted, and gradually discovered that he struggled less with his body pain and thought processes. Much relieved, he registered for another retreat.
>
> At that retreat Mitch began to fall apart. All of the adult roles he had worked so hard to construct—his sense of himself as an engineer, a father, a husband—seemed like a false front. He began to reexperience the terrible state of fear and confusion he had lived in as a child. *He was experiencing the regression that often happens on retreat.* He looked hurt, frightened, and very young. Mitch was afraid that his pain would last forever. I encouraged him to trust that he could learn to tolerate it all. “I feel so terrible, so worthless. How do I work with this?” he asked. I invited him to take a few breaths and sense his body seated on the earth. When he was ready, he began to mindfully examine the state of his body. It felt small, tight, pained, contracted. Painful though it was, he gradually relaxed around it. I invited him to notice whatever feelings were present. There was shock, vulnerability, helplessness, fear, and anger. I inquired how old he felt. “Eight,” he stated. Then I asked, “And what thoughts and stories arise with these feelings?” He told me, “I keep saying, 'I hate myself. I'm a terrible person. It feels like this will last forever.'” Gradually Mitch was able to step back and witness these thoughts with mindfulness. (Emphasis added.)
>
> Then I asked Mitch, “And these stories you have told for so

> long, are they true? Is this who you are?" I looked at him gently and directly. His sense of identity with the story began to become shaky, uncertain. I went on: "All the changing sensations of your body, the pain and tension, is that who you are?" "Not exactly." "And the difficult feelings, the fear and helplessness, are these your true self?" "Well, no." "And the judgmental thoughts and stories, are these who you are?" "No. I contain all these things, but no, they're not who I am." "And who is being aware of all of this? Look and see." "I can't exactly find anybody. There's awareness, but I'm not sure who's being aware." "How does it feel?" With a big laugh, Mitch said, "Much, much freer!" We sat for a time, resting in the awareness.
>
> Gradually, Mitch was learning to open to each level of experience without resistance of identification. Like the Buddha witnessing the painful conditions of a past life, he practiced holding it all with great compassion. In doing so, some part of him learned that the injured self was not who he really is. Slowly, Mitch began to heal. (Kornfield 2008, 63-64.)

Although Kornfield doesn't refer to this incident specifically as *meditation sickness* or *Chan sickness*, it certainly illustrates that meditation students who are meditating for longer periods of time, oftentimes in settings such as retreats, can experience painful feelings and sensations as a range of past experiences and emotions arise. In the above example, Kornfield is able to explore with Mitch his reactions in detail, processing the thoughts and emotions in order to bring them into mindfulness. I would not expect a meditation teacher who was not also a psychologist to feel comfortable exploring the student's reactions at this level, unless their relationship was already well-established and in depth.

In this dissertation, I have included the ideas of several psychologists and psychiatrists (*see* Chapter Five) who have embraced Buddhist meditation techniques and have also expounded upon the need to balance the Buddhist psychological principles with Western psychological methods as well. In this way, I hope to provide a clearer picture of how twenty-first century meditation students

handle obstacles that may be encountered on the meditative path, and how meditation teachers can help their students navigate the path without succumbing to obstruction.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF TOPIC AND QUESTION

One of them plays a piccolo in my ear
Another one makes me smell things that aren't there
And they know where to hide
And they know everything that's inside
Of my head
Tiny demons, inside me
-Todd Rundgren, "Tiny Demons" from Healing
(Rundgren 1981, ¶ 1)

Origin Of Question

It was not until my third year of doctoral studies in Buddhism that I encountered the term *Zen sickness.* During a class lecture on meditation practices, it was explained that meditators sometimes became too attached to *sunyata* (Skt., "emptiness"). The lecturer added that this condition was like a *Zen sickness.* And while we were at it, could anyone in the class point to the origin of the term *Zen sickness?* This challenge started me searching for appearances of the term *Zen sickness* in Buddhist literature. I wondered if I could find textual references to it and, if so, if I would also be able to locate a detailed definition of *Zen sickness* (hereafter, *"Chan sickness"*).

My Initial Suppositions

My own initial impression was that the term sounded like a condition wherein the meditator spent so much time focusing on the oneness of all things that, eventually, distinctions would drop away and all sensations would become a sameness; the color would seep out of one's way of seeing and everything would become shades of gray. Unreal, like dreaming in sepia tones. This was just an

image I had of what I thought *Chan sickness* might be. It also sounded like *Chan sickness* was a kind of flattening of everything into monotone, perhaps a kind of depression.

As I turned to various dictionaries and other references on Buddhism, I was surprised to learn that there is not much uniformity in the definitions that exist. In many instances, the resources that I assumed would address *Chan sickness* succinctly had no definition for it at all. This led me to believe that either the topic is highly controversial, or perhaps that the condition is relatively unknown. I then also started to wonder if it was merely an imprecise term like "the common cold," wherein any number of symptoms could be lumped under a catchall phrase. So my curiosity was piqued, and I felt drawn to unravel this mystery.

Early Possibilities (Physical, Psychological, Combination)

Initially I wondered if *Chan sickness* might be a physical condition, a psychological condition, or perhaps even a combination of both physical and psychological afflictions. Or if there were different *Chan sicknesses,* I wondered if perhaps there might be some types that were physical, some types that were psychological, and some types that were both. So based on my own experience with *zazen* (Jp., "seated meditation"), I postulated that various factors might contribute to each possible form of something that could be *Chan sickness.*

For physical conditions I listed these possibilities: (1) the meditation hall might be inhospitable to long-term meditation by virtue of being too hot, cold, drafty, stuffy, damp, dry, etc.; (2) the meditator's posture was incorrect, not sitting

with a straight spine, sitting off-balanced, etc.; (3) the meditator was trying to sit for too long a period with no break (generally 40- to 50-minute periods seemed best for most meditators, allowing time for standing, stretching, or walking (Jp., *kinhin*, "walking meditation") before returning to the cushion); or (4) the meditator was meditating too frequently (as is possible during a retreat or an intensive meditation period such as a *sesshin* [Jp., "intensive meditation period"]).

For psychological conditions I listed these possibilities: (1) the meditator might be preoccupied with painful memories (abuse, break-up or divorce, violent accident, etc.); (2) the meditator was experiencing hallucinations/demons caused by mental residua; (3) the meditator could be focused too intently on *sunyata*; (4) depression; (5) acedia; (6) anxiety; or (7) mental agitation.

For the combination of physical and psychological symptoms I listed the possibility that: (1) the meditator had inadequate preparation for what to expect during meditation; (2) the meditator was straining, trying to forcibly obtain something tangible from *zazen*, such as an enlightenment experience, a special power, etc. and pushing past both their physical and emotional limits; or (3) the meditator was engaged in a meditation schedule that was too rigorous.

For the possible definition of *Chan sickness* as an inflated attitude I listed the possibilities that: (1) the meditator was too intently focused on everything being Zen-related; or (2) the meditator was in a rarified atmosphere for the first time, such as a remote monastery, or possibly even a highly regarded *sangha* or Zen Center. I can personally recall feeling especially "elevated" after a *dharma* talk at the Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The *zendo* was so

beautiful, the incense so wonderful, the company so serious, that the richness of the experience made a deep impression on me as far as all things Zen-related. In a wider sense, I also believe that much of the imagery of Buddhism in general can be intoxicating, especially the many allusions to jewels, fragrances and flowers.

Search Strategies

Table Of Clues (e.g., Linguistic Terms in English, Chinese, Japanese)

The *Dictionary of Alternative Medicine* describes *meditation sickness* this way:

> **meditation sickness** A 'toxic' side effect of prolonged meditation which, because it induces profound relaxation, makes a person more aware of painful emotions and memories; such individuals are said to have lost their boundaries and become, in effect, 'bundles of "raw" nerves;' some believe that long-term meditation causes a plethora of mental residua, including anxiety, confusion, hallucinations, headaches, memory loss, paranoia, and others. (Segen 1988, 237)

In *The Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen*, there is a definition for *'Zembyo'* that details *Zen sickness:*

> **Zembyō, also Zenbyō**, Jp., lit. "Zen sickness"; 1. an expression for deceptive sensations and appearances (*makyō*) that can come up during the practice of *zazen*; 2. any attachment to one's own enlightenment experiences; also attachment to emptiness (Jp., *ku*; Skt., *shūnyatā*) is a Zen sickness. It is an especially pronounced form of *zembyō* when someone develops great pretensions about his experience on the Zen path and thus considers himself someone special. Also when it is all too obvious that someone has experienced enlightenment (on this, *mosshōseki*), this condition also is referred to as Zen illness. (Kohn 1991, 261)

And for the definition of *makyo*, referenced in the *Shambhala Dictionary's Zenbyo* entry:

> **Makyō**, Jp., roughly "diabolic phenomenon," from *ma* (*akuma*), "devil" and *kyo*, "phenomenon, objective world." *Makyō* are deceptive appearances and feelings that can arise in the practice of *zazen*. These phenomena include visual hallucinations as well as hallucinations involving the other senses, such as sounds, odors, etc., also prophetic visions, involuntary movements, and, rarely, even levitation. All these phenomena, whether frightening or seductive, are not "diabolic" so long as the practitioner pays them no heed and continues undistracted in his or her practice. (Kohn 1991, 138)

In the venerable *Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms*, Soothill and Hodous include for *chan bing* (*Ch*., "meditation illness") this rather succinct definition:

> **chan bing** - The ills of meditation, i.e., wandering thoughts, illusions. The illusions and nervous troubles of the mystic. (Soothill 2003, 460)

In *The Blue Cliff Record,* translators Thomas Cleary and J.C. Cleary note that:

> *Ching* is a mental object, an object, a state, a realm or sphere, a perspective (or perception). A common question is what a master's *ching* is like (i.e., what does he 'see,' what is his sphere or state of realization), and what the person in the 'realm' is like. When Chan students experienced purity or bliss, or perceived Buddhas and bodhisattvas in their meditations, they were told these were merely *ching*, mental objects or 'states' which should not be acknowledged as desirable or approved as real attainments, lest one become intoxicated by one's state. Similarly, all kinds of hallucinations were called **mo ching** or 'demon states,' illusory objects or perceptions caused by 'demons' or 'devils' (whether these are inside or outside the mind is a pointless question here), obstructing the path of

> meditation. (Cleary and Cleary 2005, 26, emphasis added)

In *Living Zen, Loving God*, Ruben L.F. Habito addresses the condition referenced in the *Zenbyo* definition above, regarding one who has developed an attachment to one's own enlightenment experience:

> In Zen one who comes to a certain experience of enlightenment sees an entirely new world for the first time, and for a time remains in the thrall of the novelty, the wonderment, the brilliance of this new perspective. In this immediate stage after that experience a certain glare remains, a certain consciousness that goes with the powerful emotions that the experience may have triggered. A tinge of attachment to the enlightenment experience remains, understandably, because it is something very intimate, very precious, something that has definitely affected one's entire outlook on life and on the universe. But if this gets out of hand, it easily leads to what is known as "Zen sickness," overenthusiasm with Zen-like expressions and paraphernalia, coupled with an extranormal propensity to bring Zen into normal conversations even when uncalled for, an overzealousness to "convert" others to Zen. Or perhaps worse, one unwittingly succumbs to the temptation of pride, because one has had an experience that others have not, and in unsubtle ways, one begins to flaunt that fact. (Habito 2004, 42)

Kapleau echoes Habito's point in a passage from *The Three Pillars of Zen*, in a comment on a letter from Yaeko Iwasaki to Sogaku Harada:

> An ancient Zen saying has it that to become attached to one's own enlightenment is as much a sickness as to exhibit a maddeningly active ego. Indeed, the profounder the enlightenment, the worse the illness. In her case I think it would have taken two or three months for the most obvious symptoms to disappear, two or three years for the less obvious, and seven or eight for the most insidious. Such symptoms are less pronounced in one as gentle as she, but in some they are positively nauseating.

> Those who practice Zen must guard against them.
> My own sickness lasted almost ten years. Ha!
> (Kapleau 2000, 321-322)

Here is our problem, then: Is *Chan sickness* an eruption of painful emotions and memories? Is it the appearance of an hallucination and/or demons during meditation? Is it a conceited attitude brought on by a successful enlightenment experience? Is it a preoccupation with everything Chan/Zen? Is it the appearance of illusions and nervous troubles? Or even more basically, are physical ills caused by meditating in cold or drafty settings, or by improper posture categorized as *Chan sickness?* Is one of these definitions more correct than the others? What do people mean when they talk about *Chan sickness?* Or are all these definitions merely variations within the broad category?

Buddhist Sutras

It occurred to me that there should be a way to investigate the elasticity of the term. I could use the dictionaries as a starting point. But to really flesh it out, I wanted to go back to the Buddhist sutras to see if they addressed *Chan sickness.* With meditation so central to Buddhist practice, especially in the Chan tradition, there had to be a roadmap (or several) for how to conduct meditation properly, and how to address potentially difficult obstructions encountered in following The Way.

Chan/Zen Patriarchs Throughout History

It seemed highly probably to me, too, that the many sages, scholars, and Chan adepts through the ages must have confronted *Chan sickness* as well, and they had no doubt developed some strategies for dealing with it, or better still, avoiding it. I grew determined to locate among the writings of Nagarjuna,

Huineng, Dogen and others some clues that could help identify the features of *Chan sickness.* I felt confident that there ought to be distinct pointers among the many writings of the Zen patriarchs.

Contemporary Chan/Zen Masters

Additionally, there is a vast Zen literature written by contemporary Chan and Zen masters to explain Zen to a Western audience. It occurred to me that if Western practitioners experienced any form of *meditation sickness,* they would want some warning signs or methods to overcome it. I was determined to examine the writings of modern-day Chan and Zen masters for possible clues to dealing with or perhaps preventing *Chan sickness.*

Western Psychologists & Psychiatrists Using Zen Meditation Techniques

I was also fairly certain that since Zen practice has been increasing on American soil for at least five decades, the psychological sciences must have had some exposure to *Chan sickness,* if it was a psychological condition. In that regard, my research has been greatly enabled by the work of psychologists and psychiatrists who employ Buddhist meditation practices in their therapeutic approach, including Aronson, Brazier, Epstein, Kornfield and others.

Parallels Suggested By Research (Acedia, Depression, Prior Conditions)

One of my initial suppositions was that *Chan sickness* was a kind of depression. I had also heard that monastics in the Christian tradition sometimes suffered an attack of “the noonday demon,” acedia. I will investigate parallels such as acedia and depression to see what possible similarities and differences exist when compared with *Chan sickness.*

Survey Of Chan/Zen Teachers At U.S. Centers

It occurred to me that not only literary sources might help solve this riddle, but also that living, Chan/Zen-trained meditation teachers who might actually have experienced or witnessed *Chan sickness* firsthand, might help elucidate a more precise definition. The idea of a research questionnaire/survey was then born and I grew determined to take my questions about *Chan sickness* into the real world of Chan and Zen practitioners.

Expected Outcome / Definitional Matrix

In the pages that follow, I will explore *Chan sickness* through these various lenses: the Buddhist canonical literature, writings of selected Chan and Zen patriarchs, contemporary meditation teachers' views, contemporary psychologists' and psychiatrists' views on the interaction of meditation and the mind; and finally detailed descriptions of similar afflictions such as depression and acedia.

Eventually, I hope to be able to supply a more comprehensive definition of *Chan sickness* for scholars, for practitioners and their meditation masters. It is possible that my dictionary entry will require several definitions to formulate a complete picture of these results. At least then, someone unsure of what the term implies will have a more workable handle than currently exists on the possible conditions associated with *Chan sickness.*

As for the Master's role in diagnosing *Chan sickness,* it remains my belief that the teacher or Master who supervises meditators must have some awareness of conditions that might be termed *Chan sickness.* The advantage for them seems clear: with such an awareness, the teacher/Master can set the meditation student

on the path to escaping or transcending *Chan sickness* and return them to the path towards Enlightenment, or at least to a regular practice of meditation.

For purposes of my research, I have treated the terms *Zen sickness, Chan sickness,* and *meditation sickness* as being the same condition.

Beyond merely defining the term, *Chan sickness,* however, I was curious to discover: if contemporary Zen masters knew of the term; if they generally agree on its meaning; if they recognized the signs of *Chan sickness* so that they can spot it in their students; if they understood how to prevent it; and if they were empowered to treat it once they diagnose it in their students. These questions were at the heart of my research questionnaire.

After my initial burst of enthusiasm for pursuing this exploration of *Chan sickness,* I experienced a mild panic. What would be the best course for researching it? I hoped Zen teachers would be open to recounting their experiences with me. I assumed I would be able to locate instances in Chan and Zen literature detailing the causes and effects of *Chan sickness.* I posited that I would be able to craft a definition or series of definitions that would encompass the full range of the information I might uncover.

I wondered how a meditation student would interpret a vision of a demonic entity if he or she had never experienced such a vision before, e.g., how they would know that such a vision was not an expected by-product of meditation. I wondered how they would know how to terminate such a vision or report it to the meditation teacher. And I wondered if the student would know not to suffer their dilemma(s) in isolation. I wondered about the kind of preparation meditation

teachers give to students on what to expect and what not to expect, i.e., the level of coaching or forewarning. And I was curious as to the expected level of reporting and confirmation. In face-to-face meetings, are meditation students encouraged to describe their meditation experiences in detail to their teachers? Otherwise, I wondered how an inexperienced meditator would know the difference between a demonic appearance and an enlightenment experience. I wondered how much students were left to sort out these alternatives either by reasoning or intuition.

Having personally attempted Zen meditation in a variety of settings and with a variety of teachers, I have my own recountable experiences with meditation techniques. I have not, however, experienced any vision that could be described as “demonic.” Of course, I would not count myself as a long-term practitioner, as I have generally not engaged in a situation where I was meditating for any time period longer than 50-60 minutes at a sitting. I have participated in one-day retreats, but these were broken up by breaks during which time the students could walk and stretch, taking time away from the cushion and away from the meditation hall. My assumption was that the engagement level is increased dramatically when one sits for a week-long *sesshin*.

I was expecting that a multimodal approach would work best at trying to get at the nature of *Chan sickness.* I was also eager go out on a limb and examine side-by-side comparisons with what I found out about *Chan sickness* and other conditions that seemed at first glance to be rather similar, including depression and acedia.

I was determined to poll a wide range of Zen teachers and decided to formulate a written questionnaire that I could send to teachers across the United States. I was hopeful that, even if some teachers might have no experience with *Chan sickness,* or might not even believe in the possibility of such a condition, others might willingly recount their experiences, whether as meditators themselves, or what variations they might have encountered in the process of teaching students in the *zendo* (Jp., “meditation hall”).

One of my biggest concerns at the outset of pursuing this real world human research was that I might be seen as stigmatizing Zen meditation by my exploration of *Chan sickness.* I wanted to be sensitive to the possibility that meditation teachers might bristle at being asked about something which is possibly controversial or seen as a negative aspect of the Zen experience. My intentions were not to sound an alarm or raise hackles about a condition or group of conditions that may, in fact, affect only a small percentage of meditation practitioners. My chief concern was the exploration of whether the term is descriptive for a specific condition (or conditions), such that it is meaningful for instructors and practitioners everywhere. At the outset, I anticipated that I might encounter a wide range of attitudes from Zen practitioners, including the possibility that some might doubt the very existence of something called *Chan sickness.* And at the very least, I allowed for the possibility that a wide variety of interpretations of the term might exist. This would follow my own experience that among the available literary sources, there is a vast array of suggested meanings for the term, *and virtually no agreement*. I am confident that with such a well-

rounded, multimodal approach, surveying literature and interviewing present-day meditation teachers, I can fashion the most logical lexicon to help advance a common understanding of the terminology.

This dissertation will explore all of these avenues with the driving goal of determining if *Chan sickness* exists, and if there is more than one definition for it. This quest was fueled by my desire to resolve the mystery of the term 'Chan sickness' raised by an array of heretofore conflicting and widely divergent definitions.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF BUDDHIST CANONICAL LITERATURE

(THREE SUTRAS AND ONE EPIC POEM)

True Nature is free from all phenomena
Which are illusions by causes created.
Noumena neither rise nor fall, but all
Phenomena are flowers in the sky.
-from Surangama Sutra
(Luk 2007, 116)

Why Examine These Three Sutras And An Epic Poem?

I wanted to explore relevant Buddhist sutras to determine if there was any early evidence or description of *Chan sickness,* or something equivalent. If Sakyamuni Buddha was thought to have lived from 486 BCE to 400 BCE, and many sutras were dated from 800 to 1,000 years after his life, then presumably the sutras reflected these ten or more centuries of experience with meditation techniques, including the potential pitfalls. And considering that Buddhist meditation might be viewed as having descended from Hindu meditation, and by extension, from yogic and even Vedic practices, perhaps there was an extended record of something like *Chan sickness* recorded in the sutras that could be useful in narrowing a definition still relevant to present-day practice.

Two sutras especially prominent in Chan/Zen studies are *The Lankavatara Sutra* and *The Diamond Sutra.* Both are key to studying Mahayana Buddhism. *The Lankavatara Sutra* (PY = *lengqie jing*), written before 443 CE, was translated into Chinese by Gunabhadra, whom a later author, Ching-chueh, credits as being the Father of Zen in China. Historians, though, traditionally credit Bodhidharma

as being the Father of Zen in China, and he was thought to have handed *The Lankavatara Sutra* down to Huike, the Second Patriarch (D.T. Suzuki 1999, xlviii-xlix). Suzuki's English translation of the sutra reaches nearly 300 pages. It lays out the doctrines of Yogacara and Tathagatagarbha, emphasizing consciousness as the only reality. Suzuki reveals in Chapter Two the following response from the Buddha to Mahamati:

> Again, Mahamati, there are some Brahmans and Sramanas who recognising that the external world which is of Mind itself is seen as such owing to the discrimination and false intellection practised since beginningless time, know that the world has no self-nature and has never been born, it is like a cloud, a ring produced by a firebrand, the castle of the Gahdharvas, a vision, a mirage, the moon as reflected in the ocean, and a dream; that Mind in itself has nothing to do with discrimination and causation, discourses of imagination, and terms of qualification (*lakshyalakshana*); that body, property, and abode are objectifications of the *Alayavijnana*, which is in itself above [the dualism of] subject and object, that the state of imagelessness which is in compliance with the awakening of Mind itself, is not affected by such changes as arising, abiding, and destruction. (D.T. Suzuki 1999, 37-38)

The Diamond Sutra (Skt., *Vajracchedika Prajnaparamita Sutra;* Ch., *jingang jing*), was first translated into Chinese by Kumarajiva in 401 CE. Red Pine's translation runs to only 27 pages. Readable in 40 minutes or so, *The Diamond Sutra* is often memorized and chanted in Buddhist monasteries. It is thought to challenge one's notions of the nature of reality and enlightenment. Pine quotes the Sixth Patriarch, Huineng as saying, “This sutra is present in the nature of all beings. Those who don't look within read only the words. While those who become aware of their own minds realize this sutra does not consist of words.”

Pine translates the Buddha's explanation to Subhuti at the end of Chapter 32, the final chapter, as follows:

> Furthermore, Subhuti, if a fearless bodhisattva filled measureless, infinite worlds with the seven jewels and gave them as an offering to the tathagatas, the arhans, the fully-enlightened ones, and a noble son or daughter grasped but a single four-line gatha of this teaching on the perfection of wisdom and memorized, discussed, recited, mastered, and explained it in detail to others, the body of merit produced by that noble son or daughter as a result would be immeasurably, infinitely greater. And how should they explain it? By not explaining. Thus is it called 'explaining.'
>
> As a lamp, a cataract, a star in space
> an illusion, a dewdrop, a bubble
> a dream, a cloud, a flash of lightning
> view all created things like this.
> (Pine 2001, 27)

While both *The Lankavatara Sutra* and *The Diamond Sutra* are cherished in the Chan tradition, having been favored by Bodhidharma (*Lankavatara*) and Huineng (*Diamond*), they both contain a wealth of doctrine and philosophy, yet little of the step-by-step instructions for how one conducts oneself in the process of meditation.

Chan Master Sheng-yen (1997) notes in his introduction to *The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment* that three sutras were especially important to Chinese Buddhism: *The Awakening of Faith, The Surangama Sutra,* and *The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment.* This may be because these three sutras point to specific methods to be used in meditation, which Chinese Buddhists found to be more instructive (i.e., more practical) than many of the more heavily philosophical texts of Indian Buddhism. Additionally, I wanted to consider the defeat of Mara

contained in the epic poem, *Buddhacarita* (Acts of the Buddha), attributed to Asvaghosa, alongside the three sutras.

Hershock gives us insight into the systematic way that Buddhism changed in its import from India to China. In a section entitled, “From Orthodoxy to Orthopraxy: The Crucial Tide Change in Chinese Buddhism,” he notes that much like the Buddha's use of *upaya* (Skt., “skillful means”) to tailor his teachings to various Indian audiences, Chinese Buddhists sought to use skillful means to reposition the teachings to make them more relevant to Chinese audiences living a thousand years later, improvising new vocabularies and rhetorical strategies.

> Granted the literary bias of Chinese elite culture and the role of written texts in establishing and maintaining authority, the first overtures in this direction came in the form of Chinese compositions of new Buddhist sutras—that is, texts purporting to transmit the teachings of the historical Buddha himself. An influential example is the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment. Also crucial were Chinese-composed treatises that represented themselves as the work of eminent Indian commentators. The most widely disseminated and respected of these is the Awakening of the Mahayana Faith, a seminal sixth-century text that helped shape the curriculum of all Chinese schools of Buddhism and that expressed the inseparability of faith or confidence and practice or actualizing enlightenment. (Hershock 2005, 63-64)

The Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen details that 'sutra,' (Skt., “thread”; Pali, *sutta*; Jp., *kyo*) suggests a discourse of the Buddha. They are largely found in the Sutra-pitaka (“Basket of the Teachings”), which is the second part of the Buddhist canon known as the Tripitaka. Extant in Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan translations, they are said to have come directly from the Buddha. Ananda, a student of the Buddha, purportedly retained the discourses of

the Buddha in his memory, then later recounted them at the first Buddhist council held soon after the Buddha's death. The prose texts begin with the phrase, "Thus have I heard."

> After these introductory words, the circumstances that occasioned the Buddha to give the discourse are described, as well as the place, the time of year, etc. Then the actual instruction follows, sometimes in the form of a dialogue. The style of the sutras is simple, popular, and didactically oriented. They are rich in parables and allegories. In many sutras, songs (gatha) are interpolated. Each sutra constitutes a self-sufficient unit. The Hinayana sutras are divided into "collections," which in the Pali canon are called Nikayas and in the Sanskrit version Agamas. The nikayas are the Dighanikaya, Majjhima-nikaya, Samyuttanikaya, Anguttara-nikaya, and Khuddaka-nikaya. Along with these Hinayana sutras, a great number of Mahayana sutras have also been preserved. They were originally composed in Sanskrit but are for the most part extant only in Chinese or Tibetan translations. They are thought to have been composed between the 1st century BCE and the 6th century CE. They adopted the external form of the Hinayana sutras—they also begin with the words "Thus have I heard" and a description of the place, occasion, and the persons present. Three types of Mahayana sutras are differentiated: Vaipulya-sutras, dharanis, and independent sutras. (Kohn 1991, 212-213)

Red Pine sheds some light on the phrase *"Evan maya shrutan"* (Thus have I heard) in his translator's preface to *The Diamond Sutra.* Pine discusses how it is Ananda's (Shakyamuni's cousin) voice that begins all the sutras. Apparently, Ananda asked the Buddha what words to use at the start of each sutra. The Buddha answered him, *"Evan maya shrutan."* So Ananda used this phrase to begin the hundreds of discourses he recounted from memory at Buddhism's First Council in 383 BCE. Pine also notes that Chiang Wei-nung says, "When people

believe something, they say 'it is thus.' When they don't believe something they say, 'it is not thus.' *The Avatamsaka Sutra* says, 'Belief marks the beginning of the Path. It is the mother of virtues and protector of all good *dharmas*.' Belief is the first gate on the Path. Hence, this expression is placed at the very beginning." (Pine 2001, 41-42)

I wanted to seek out what the early Buddhist canonical texts might have to say about the difficulties encountered in meditation practice generally, and about *Chan sickness* in particular. If there were mentions of *Chan sickness* in the sutras, especially these three sutras concerned with the practical considerations of meditation, then we can establish that *Chan sickness* has been recognized for many centuries. Certainly Buddhist texts have recognized that there are demons and temptations encountered during meditation. Indeed, the appearance of demons is a thread that runs through many Buddhist writings. Whether the demons are actual entities or hallucinations may be the subject of further study or debate. In fact, *The Awakening of Faith* instructs the practitioner to regard demons as mental hallucinations. Interestingly, demons are cited as factors contributing to acedia, as described by the Christian monks (*see* Chapter Six).

Awakening of Faith

Background

The Awakening of Faith ("AOF"), also known as *Discourse on the Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* (Skt., *Mahayana Sraddhotpada Sastra*) is attributed to Asvaghosa, born a Brahman in Eastern India about 80 CE. In search of the earliest versions of AOF, scholars have found only Chinese versions, yet none in Sanskrit. Paramartha is thought to have translated the earliest version in

553 CE, with a later version translated by Siksananda in about 695 CE. In preparing his English translation, D.T. Suzuki remarks:

> [T]his book, the *Awakening of Faith*, is of paramount importance in its being the first attempt of systematising the fundamental thoughts of the Mahayana Buddhism, as well as in its forming a main authority of all the Mahayanistic schools, those who study the doctrinal history of Buddhism cannot dispense with it... (Asvaghosa 2003, 45)

Passage from the Discourse, Section IV: Practice of Faith

In the passages below, I was particularly fascinated with AOF's cautions about evil spirits, special ability states, predilection for disease states, and mental hallucinations. These various afflictions, described as pitfalls awaiting the practitioner (referred to in the text as 'the practiser'), are echoed throughout history as the afflictions of *Chan sickness.*

> Some people scantily supplied with the root of merit (*kucalamula*) may yield to the temptation of Maras, tirthakas, or evil spirits. [For instance] those evil ones sometimes assuming horrible forms may frighten the practiser; sometimes manifesting themselves in beautiful figures, they may fascinate him; sometimes appearing in form of a deva, or of a Boddhisattva, or even of a Buddha with all his excellent and magnified features, they may speak about *dharani* or the *paramita*, or may give instructions about various means of emancipation (*mukti*), declaring that there is no hatred, no friendship, no causation, no retribution, or declaring that all things in the world are absolute nothingness (*atyantacunyata*), that they are in their essence Nirvana itself. Or they may reveal to the practiser his own past and future states of existence, they may teach him to read the thoughts of others, may grant him incomparable power of eloquence, may induce him to crave covetously for worldly fame and advantages.
>
> Further, through the influence of those evil ones the practiser may sometimes be inordinately

susceptible to dissatisfaction or delight; he may sometimes be too misanthropic or too philanthropic; he may sometimes not sleep for a long time; he may sometimes be affected by diseases; he may sometimes remain discouraged and indolent; he may sometimes rise all on a sudden with full energy, but only to sink down again into languor; he may sometimes, being over-sceptical, not believe in anything; he may sometimes, abandoning the excellent religious observance, enjoy himself in frivolous occupations, indulge in worldly affairs, gratify his desires and inclinations; he may sometimes attain to the *samadhi* of heretics [i.e., *tirthaka*] and, remaining in a state of trance a day or two, or even seven, and being supplied imaginarily with some palatable food and drink, and feeling very comfortable mentally and physically, he may have no sensation of hunger or thirst; he may sometimes be induced to enjoy female fascinations; he may sometimes be very irregular in taking meals, either too much or too little; he may sometimes look either very handsome or very ugly in appearance.

If the practiser get enraptured by those visions and prejudices (*kleca*), he will lose his root of merit (*kucalamula*) accumulated in his previous existences. Therefore he should exercise a deep and thorough contemplation, thinking that all those [heretical states of samadhi] are the temptations of Maras or evil spirits that take advantage of his deficiency in merits and his intensity of karma-hindrances (*karmavaranga*).

After this thought he should make another thought, viz., that all these are nothing but **mental hallucinations.** [Emphasis added.] When he makes these thoughts, the visions and imaginations will instantly disappear, and, becoming free from all attributes [of limitation], he will enter into the true samadhi. He has then not only liberated himself from all modes of subjectivity, he has also effaced the idea of suchness. Even when he rises up from a deep meditation, no visionary images, no prejudices will take possession of in his mind, since he has destroyed the root of illusion through the power of the samadhi. On the contrary, all the excellent and virtuous deeds which are in conformity with suchness will be constantly performed by him,

> while all hindrances without exception will be removed by him, who now exhibiting great spiritual energy will never become exhausted. (Asvaghosa 2003, 136-139)
>
> Those who practice this samadhi will procure in their present life ten beneficial results:
> ….
> 9. If not practising deep meditation, those prejudices (*acrava*) which are now getting weaker, will not assert themselves in them.
> 10. While practising meditation, they will not be disturbed by any external objects, such s voices, sounds, etc. (Asvaghosa 2003, 140)
>
> Contemplate that ignorant minds, on account of their groundless imagination, take the unreal as they see it, for reality. (Asvaghosa 2003, 141)

Here, then, are warnings that there are spirits or mental hallucinations that would derail the practitioner. There is also the advice that naming them as mental hallucinations and then dismissing them, will allow the practitioner to thrive.

Surangama Sutra

Background

The Surangama Sutra ("SUR"), sometimes spelled *Shurangama Sutra,* (Ch., *Da foding rulai miyin xiuzheng liaoyi zhupusa wanxing shoulengyan jing,* also known by shorter titles, *Da foding shoulengyan jing* or simply and more commonly *leng yan jing*) is a a principal sutra text used in the Chan school. *Suran* means [of or belonging to] a Hero or a Brave person, *Gama* means [style of] steps or method [for making progress, for advancing]. It is believed to have been translated in the early eighth century CE by Sramana Paramiti from Central India.

In the preface to his English translation, Charles Luk notes that once SUR reached China, it was widely studied by all the great masters before and after their

major awakening, and also studied in most Chinese monasteries. “According to the late master Hsu Yun, it should be studied carefully until it is well understood by students of Mahayana and Ch'an before they begin their spiritual training” (Luk 2007, xxi).

Ajahn Amaro Bhikkhu, Abbot of Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery notes that the *Surangama Sutra* “spells out certain aspects of the meditative process in uniquely clear and helpful ways. Among these aspects are, notably: the impossibility of locating the mind in space and time, the vast variety of meditation methods available for us to use; and, lastly, *the manyfold dangers and distortions of view that can arise in the pursuit of spiritual excellence.”* (Buddhist Text Translation Society, www.surangama.drba.org, accessed 2/20/2012) [emphasis added]

Rev. Heng Sure, President of Dharma Realm Buddhist Association and Director of Berkeley Buddhist Monastery comments: “Over the years, when I have needed advice in cultivation, I have referred to the *Surangama Sutra* for authoritative information. I go to the “Fifty Demonic States of Mind” (part 10) to check on *strange states in meditation.* [Emphasis added.] I go to the “Twenty-Five Sages” (part 6) for encouragement on the path from the voices of Bodhisattvas. I go to the “Four Clear and Definitive Instructions on Purity” (part 7) for clarity on interaction with the world; for example, there I find the Buddha's reasons for advocating a harmless, plant-based diet.” (Buddhist Text Translation Society, www.surangama.drba.org, accessed 2/20/2012)

> *Passage from Chapter II: The Phenomenon in the Tathagata Store, the section entitled, "The uncreated and unending."*

> (The Buddha said:) 'Purnamaitrayaniputra, it is the same with all Buddhas in the ten directions. Delusion has no root for it has no self-nature. Fundamentally there has never been delusion and though there is some semblance of it, when one is awakened, it vanishes (for) Bodhi does not beget it. This is like a man suffering from an optical illusion who sees flowers in the sky; if he is cured, these flowers will disappear. But if he waits for them to appear again, do you call him stupid or intelligent?'
>
> Purnamaitrayaniputra replied: 'Fundamentally space has no flowers but due to defective sight they are seen as being in the void; this is already a false attitude. If in addition, they are required to appear again, this is mere folly; how then can that man be called stupid or intelligent?'
>
> The Buddha said: 'Since you have interpreted well the non-existence of flowers in the sky, why do you still ask me about the immaterial absolute Bodhi of all Buddhas creating mountains, rivers and the great earth? It is like ore which contains pure gold; once the latter is extracted, it cannot be mixed with the ore again. It is also like the ashes of burnt wood which cannot become wood again. It is the same with all Buddhas of the nirvanic enlightenment. (Luk 2007, 92)

"Seeing flowers in the sky" is cited here as an example of delusion. Curing the delusion is associated with the vision of flowers disappearing. But the sutra then goes on to address the expectation that the delusion will reappear. There is something about the mind, and its habitual patterns of thought, that continues to gravitate toward delusion.

Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment

Background

The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment (Ch., *Yuanjue jing*) ("SPE"), is believed to have been written in the early eighth century CE. Charles Muller writes that its influence was widely felt in the meditation-oriented East Asian Buddhist schools, first in Chinese Chan and then in Korean Son. He notes that its influence reached Japan, but not to the same level as in China and Korea. Although there are echoes of themes originally explained in the AOF, the SPE discusses them more concisely. The SPE's twelve chapters each present issues relating to doctrine and meditation from one of the twelve bodhisattvas in attendance at the sermon (Muller 1999, 3).

Master Sheng-yen refers to the sutra as *The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment* (SCE). Interestingly, Muller discusses his translation of the title by means of the ideograph's meaning and the context, as well as Kihwa's commentary.

> The Chinese ideograph *yuan* originally means "round," but includes connotation of "complete," "consummate," or "perfect." Because of this wide range of meaning, I have seen a multiplicity of tentative translations, including: "Scripture of Consummate Enlightenment," "Book of Complete Enlightenment," "Sutra of Round Enlightenment," and others. The reason that I have chosen the term "perfect," instead of "round" or "consummate," is because of the strong implications within the text that this enlightenment is not only "complete," "round," or "consummate," but also "correct," "real," or "true." As Kihwa explains in his commentary, it is not only that the doctrine contained within the SPE is "complete" and "all-embracing," but its lectures are "corrective"—they enable practitioners to fix their mistakes to perfect

> their practice. With the impression that it is the word best fit to express all of these aspects, I have chosen the English word “perfect.” (Muller 1999, 40)

> Why does *The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment* hold such an important position in Chinese Buddhism? For one thing, we cannot overlook the impact that Master Zongmi has had on Buddhism. Master Zongmi was highly respected as both a great scholar and a great practitioner. Therefore, his particular emphasis on *The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment* strongly influenced successive generations of Chinese Buddhists. Master Zongmi is the Fifth Patriarch of the Hua-yen sect and a patriarch of the southern Ho-tse Ch'an lineage, which can be traced to Shenhui (684-758), a disciple of the Sixth Patriarch, Huineng (638-713). The lineage proceeds: Huineng—Shenhui—Zhiru—Weizhong—Daoyuan—Zongmi. (Sheng-yen 1997, 4)

Peter Gregory notes that Tsung-mi (PY, Zongmi) held SPE in especially high regard, even though he was widely known for his affinity for the Hua-yen Sutra. “Tsung-mi's esteem for this work was a direct result of his personal experience: it was his encounter with this text that precipitated his initial enlightenment experience while still a novice monk under Tao-yuan's tutelage in Sui-chou (Gregory 1991, 167).

> Tsung-mi praised the SPE as a text that offered both philosophical and practical dimensions: a clear and concise description of the attitudes and mechanics related to meditation practice, along with a solid grounding in AMF/Hua-yen metaphysical and soteriological principles. The SPE was much shorter and more concise than related works such as the *Surangama* and *Hua-yen* sutras. It was not as philosophically complex as the AMF, yet offered more variety in terms both of philosophy and meditation technique than the *Diamond Sutra.* The fact that Tsung-mi, who would eventually be considered as one of the founding fathers of the

> Hua-yen school, should have rated the SPE to be of greater value than the *Hua-yen ching* as worthy of note. He said, in this regard: If you want to propagate the truth, single out its quintessence, and thoroughly penetrate the ultimate meaning, do not revere the *Hua-yen Sutra* above all others. Ancient and modern worthies and masters of the Tripitaka in both the western regions and this land have all classified it as supreme, as fully related in [Ch'eng-kuan's] introduction to his commentary. Yet its principles become so confused within its voluminous size that beginners become distraught and have difficulty entering into it. It is not as good as this scripture (the SPE), whose single fascicle can be entered immediately. (Muller 1999, 15-16)

Muller points out a remarkable feature of the SPE: it can transform the thinking patterns of its readers. He asserts, "In a manner similar to such texts as the *Diamond Sutra* and *Platform Sutra,* the SPE is composed of passages that are designed to create a shift in the consciousness of the reader—to engender awakening (most importantly the first three chapters, but also in later portions of the text) (Muller 1999, 40).

Muller notes that his translation of the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* will be of considerable assistance to those pursuing a Chan/Son/Zen practice, as:

> [i]t is packed full of concrete advice on Buddhist philosophy, meditation, monastic conduct, and so forth, presented in a format that simply cannot be found in presently existing works on Zen in Western languages. Up to the present, Zen practitioners in the West have had little other than koan collections or the sermons of their local teachers to serve as their guide, so this work should help to fill in this gap. In studying the SPE, such practitioners will have access to the instruction of one of the most authoritative and enduring meditation manuals in the entire tradition. (Muller 1999, viii)

Passage from Chapter 10: Universal Enlightenment Bodhisattva

Bodhisattva of Universal Enlightenment

Virtuous man, the wondrous *Dharma* that is actualized by this good teacher should be free from four kinds of faults. What are these four faults?

The first is the fault of contrivance. If a man says: 'I exert myself in all kinds of practices based on my intrinsic [pure] mind in order to seek Complete Enlightenment,' this is a fault, because the nature of Complete Enlightenment is not 'attained' by contrivance.

The second is the fault of allowing things to be as they are. If a man says: 'I neither wish to sever birth and death nor seek nirvana. There are no conceptions of samsara and nirvana as truly arising or perishing. I allow everything to take its course with the various natures of dharmas in my quest for Complete Enlightenment,' this is a fault, because the nature of Complete Enlightenment does not come about through accepting things as they are.

The third is the fault of stopping. If a man says, 'In my quest for Complete Enlightenment, if I permanently stop my mind from having any thoughts, then I will attain the quiescence and equality of the nature of all [*dharmas*],' this is a fault, because the nature of Complete Enlightenment does not conform with the stopping of thoughts.

The fourth is the fault of annihilation. If a man says: 'In my quest for Complete Enlightenment, if I permanently annihilate all vexations, then my body and mind, not to mention the illusory realms of sense faculties and dust, will ultimately be emptiness and utter nothingness. Everything will be [in the state of] eternal quiescence,' this is a fault, because the nature of Complete Enlightenment is not annihilation. (Emphasis added.)

One who is free from these four faults will know purity. To discern these faults is to have the right discernment. To have other discernments than these is called erroneous discernment.

Virtuous man, sentient beings in the Dharma Ending Age who wish to cultivate themselves should, to the end of their lives, make offerings to

> virtuous friends and serve good teachers. When a good teacher approaches them, they should sever arrogance and pride. When the teacher leaves them, they should sever hatred and resentment. Be it a favorable or adverse condition that [a teacher] brings them, they should regard it as empty space. They should fully realize that their own bodies and minds are ultimately identical with all sentient beings', and are the same in essence, without difference. If they practice in this way, they will enter the [realm of] Complete Enlightenment.
>
> Virtuous man, when sentient beings in the Dharma Ending Age are unable to accomplish the Path, it is due to the seeds of love and hatred towards themselves and others since beginningless time. Thus they are not liberated. If a man regards his foes as he would his parents, without duality, then all faults will be eliminated. Within all *dharmas*, self, others, love, and hatred will also be eliminated.
>
> Virtuous man, sentient beings in their quest for Complete Enlightenment in the Dharma Ending Age should give rise to the bodhi-mind, saying: 'I will lead all sentient beings throughout boundless space into ultimate Complete Enlightenment. In [the realm of] Complete Enlightenment, there is no realizer of enlightenment, and [the signs of] self, others, and all characteristics are left behind.' Giving rise to such a mind, they will not fall into erroneous views. (Sheng-yen 1997, 57-59)

As a comparison to Sheng-yen's translation, Muller calls this tenth chapter of the sutra, "Universal Enlightenment Bodhisattva," and titles this section, "The Four Maladies." These four are:

> *The Contrivance Malady*
>
> Good Sons, the subtle *dharma* that is actualized by this Genuine Teacher should be free from the Four Maladies. What are the Four Maladies? The first is the malady of "contrivance." Say, for example, there is someone who says "based on my original mind I shall carry out various practices" and wants to achieve Perfect Enlightenment. Since the nature

of Perfect Enlightenment is not something that can be attained by contrivance, it is called a "malady."

The Naturalist Malady

The second is the "naturalist" malady. Say, for example, there is someone who says, "We should presently neither cut off samsara nor seek nirvana. Samsara and nirvana actually lack any conception of arising and ceasing. We should just naturally go along with the various natures of reality," and wants to achieve Perfect Enlightenment. Since the nature of Perfect Enlightenment does not come about through "accepting things as they are," this is called a "malady."

The Stopping Malady

The third is the "stopping" malady. Say, for example, there is someone who says "from my present thought, I shall permanently stop all thought and thus apprehend the cessation and equanimity of all natures" and wants to achieve Perfect Enlightenment. Since the nature of Perfect Enlightenment is not met through the stopping of thoughts, it is called a "malady."

The Annihilation Malady

The fourth is the "annihilation" malady. Say, for example, there is someone who says "I will now permanently annihilate all defilements. Body and mind are ultimately empty, lacking anything. How much more should all the false realms of the sense organs and their objects be permanently erased?" and seeks Perfect Enlightenment. Since the characteristic of the nature of Perfect Enlightenment is not annihilation, it is called a "malady." When you are free from the Four Maladies, you will be aware of purity. The making of this observation is called "correct understanding." Any other observation is called "mistaken understanding." (Muller 1999, 222-223)

In the SPE/SCE, practitioners are advised to avoid the fault of annihilation. I had initially seized on the term *annihilation sickness* (Ch., *mieh*

bing) as what *Chan sickness* might be: trying to transform all into nothingness as a means of eliminating obstacles, or eliminating duality. By the fault of annihilation, one throws the baby out with the bathwater—it does not do to declare that all is nothingness. This is a dangerous pitfall. As Sheng-yen cautions in his commentary,

> The fourth fault is annihilation. It is not the same as the third fault of stopping. Stopping means that the mind does not move and that the sense consciousnesses do not arise. Once the mind moves again, however, the sense faculties begin to function once more. Annihilation means ceasing to exist. This fault happens at a more advanced stage than stopping. I sometimes describe the path of practice as going from scattered mind to one mind to no-mind. One mind corresponds to samadhi, in which there is no distinction, no differentiation, and the mind does not move. With annihilation, however, the mind no longer exists. Senses no longer function. Vexations and wisdom no longer exist. Nothing exists. Some would say such a person has entered nirvana. Others would say this person has ceased to exist. (Sheng-yen 1997, 278)

Interestingly, in a translator's note Muller comments on the Annihilation Malady, affirming what I initially discovered in my search for a definition of *Chan sickness:* this variation of *Chan sickness,* which Muller calls "emptiness" sickness, is especially observable in Zen Buddhism. As Muller explains:

> The annihilation malady is representative of a common tendency in Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism. *One might also call it the "emptiness" sickness.* Holding inappropriately to an attitude of nonexistence of self and world can result in a dangerous nihilistic attitude. Luk translates as "the illness of elimination." (Muller 1999, 224; emphasis added)

Buddhacarita—"Defeat of Mara"

In Book XIII of the *Buddhacarita*, the chapter entitled, "Defeat of Mara," perhaps authored by Asvaghosa, Sakyamuni encounters an army of distractions, temptations, bombardments, attempts at derailment, all engineered by Mara to pull the Buddha out of his meditation underneath the tree. It seems reasonable to assume that if the model of Buddhist meditation, Sakyamuni Buddha, was subjected to attacks from demons, then others who meditate in this way might also be subject to such attacks. Mara is referred to in the text as the enemy of liberation. It follows, then that one seeking liberation–especially through meditation–may have to defeat just such an enemy.

> (34) Then Mara gave orders to his raging army of demons for terrifying the sage. Thereon that army of his resolved to break down his steadfastness with their various powers.
> (35) Some stood trying to frighten him, their many tongues hanging out flickering, their teeth sharp-pointed, their eyes like the sun's orb, their mouths gaping, their ears sticking up stiff as spikes.
> (36) As they stood there in such guise, horrible in appearance and manner, he was no more alarmed by them or shrank before them than before over-excited infants at play. (Johnston 1998, 195)

Mara commanding demons to terrify the Buddha as he was meditating, prefigures the appearances of demons to the modern-day meditator. Demons function as delusions, distractions, hallucinations, obstacles to enlightenment. Demons as described in the above passage from the *Buddhacarita* are also quite scary–terrifying visions of monsters with savage teeth, etc.–definitely a meditation buzzkill. Yet the Buddha remained free from harm, clearly sensing

that they were only distractions as rude children might be. So the Buddha's example is to prevent them from harming one's meditational efforts.

Implications of These Sutra and Epic Poem Passages

These sutra passages demonstrate different aspects of elements that might derail one's practice, if allowed to continue unhindered. AOF cites to spirits or mental hallucinations. SUR cites to flowers falling from the sky, a possible beautiful image, but one that nonetheless illustrates a delusional way of thinking. SCE/SPE cites to the fault of annihilation sickness, where one attempts to relegate everything to utter nothingness/no mind. This can become a faulty way of viewing the world, itself a delusion. And finally, the Buddha's exemplary behavior is demonstrated in the epic poem, the *Buddhacarita*: acknowledging demons but ultimately treating them as rude children. Clearly, the sutras and poem acknowledge the inner distractions that arise during meditation, making it potentially painful and difficult to continue. There is also the Buddhist term, *Klesa-mara,* which ascribes to Mara all unskillful emotions. These are most likely doubt and temptation, which are major obstructions on the spiritual path. Of course, the chief difficulty for the meditation practitioner may just be determining what is a demon or hallucination, and what is real (or seems believably real). This may be the kind of discernment that a meditation teacher can be called upon to help.

CHAPTER 3

WRITINGS OF SELECTED CHAN AND ZEN PATRIARCHS

If their motivation is bad, virtually all Zen practitioners find themselves blocked in both the active and quietistic approaches to their practice of koan meditation. They fall into a state of severe depression and distraction; the fire mounts to the heart, the metal element in the lungs shrinks painfully, the health generally declines, and quite frequently they develop an illness most difficult to cure. Yet if they polish and perfect themselves in the true practice of introspection, they will conform to the secret methods for the ultimate nourishment, their bodies and minds will become strong, their vitality great, and they will readily attain to enlightenment in all things.

-Zen Master Hakuin
(Yampolsky 1971, 29-30)

Looking to the Chan Exemplars for Early Evidence of Chan Sickness

After considering what markers might be found in the Buddhist sutras, I was curious to see what Chan and Zen luminaries, the exemplar patriarchs might have written or said over time about the difficulties encountered in meditation practice, as well as what dynamics should play out between Master and Student.

In considering physical sickness, it seemed prudent to investigate what instructions have been handed down over the years. There is no shortage of written instruction on how to practice *shikantaza* (Jp., "just sitting"), or *zazen* (Jp., "seated meditation"). In investigating the potential for physical illness, it seems logical to look to the Chan and Zen patriarchs to see what they advise for proper practice. I wondered if practicing with poor posture, for example, might lead to *Chan sickness.* In considering mental and emotional factors, I was willing to consider even the difficult philosophical and metaphysical arguments put forward by patriarchs such as Nagarjuna.

Writings of Chan/Zen Patriarchs

Nagarjuna (India)

Writing in the second century CE, Nagarjuna, who is revered as a Buddhist saint, grew to become one of the most influential Mahayana Buddhist philosophers. His metaphysical and epistemological treatises are studied in all the major Buddhist schools throughout Tibet, China, Japan, and Korea.

In the *Mulamadhyamakakarika (The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way),* Nagarjuna writes in "Examination of Conditions":

> An existent entity (mental episode)
> Has no object.
> Since a mental episode is without an object,
> How could there be any percept-condition?
> (Garfield 1995, 4)

To me, this speaks to the appearance during meditation of some vision like a demon. If there is truly nothing to be perceived, no object, how could there be the perception of a demon? Could the appearance of a demon be considered a mental episode? Or later, during his "Examination of Suffering":

> No suffering is self-caused.
> Nothing causes itself.
> (Garfield 1995, 34)

Or from his "Examination of Essence":

> How could it be appropriate
> For fabricated essence to come to be?
> Essence itself is not artificial
> And does not depend on another.
> (Garfield 1995, 39)

In "Examination of Errors":

> We say that the pleasant
> Is dependent upon the unpleasant.
> Without the unpleasant there wouldn't be any.

> It follows that the unpleasant is not tenable
> When there is no pleasant,
> How can there be desire?
> Where there is no unpleasant,
> How can there be anger?
> (Garfield 1995, 64)

Nagarjuna is acknowledged as the founder of the Madhyamaka school of Mahayana Buddhism and revered by some as the First Patriarch. It is fascinating to try and understand the shades of meaning he weighs and parses in his philosophical discourse.

Bodhidharma (India)

Bodhidharma (440-528 CE), the much-loved and larger-than-life figure who is thought to have brought Zen Buddhism to China from India, has always held a fascination for me.

In one of the writings attributed to Bodhidharma, *Two Entrances,* he explains the Buddhist path:

> Now, entering the path there are many roads. To summarize them, they reduce to two types. The first is entrance by principle and the second entrance by practice. Entering by principle means that one awakens to the thesis by means of the teachings, and one deeply believes that all living beings, common and sagely, are identical to the True Nature; that it is merely because of the unreal covering of adventitious dust that the True Nature is not revealed. If one rejects the false and reverts to the real and in a coagulated state abides in wall-examining, without shifting, in no way following after the written teachings—this is mysteriously tallying with principle. It is nondiscriminative, quiescent, and inactive; we call it entrance by principle.
>
> Entering by practice means the four practices, for all other practices are included within these. What are the four? The first is the practice of requiting injury; the second is the practice of

> following conditions; the third is the practice of having nothing to be sought; and the fourth is the practice of according with Dharma. (Broughton 1999, 9-10)

In a sense, I have always felt that Bodhidharma's Zen was much more pure and straightforward than Dogen's Zen, also less formal and more individualized. I had always associated Bodhidharma with the image of doing *zazen* facing a cave wall. I was surprised to read his advice that you should free yourself from the cushion – this was quite an unexpected revelation.

In the “Wake-up Sermon” attributed to Bodhidharma, the patriarch says:

> Not thinking about anything is zen. Once you know this, walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, everything you do is zen. To know that the mind is empty is to see the buddha. The buddhas of the ten directions have no mind. To see no mind is to see the buddha. (Pine 1987, 49)

Dumoulin situates Bodhidharma within the Chan school's timeline, explaining his significance in transporting Buddhism from India to China:

> The first spiritual transmission, from Sakyamuni to his disciple Kasyapa, established the Zen patriarchate. Along with the patriarchate, Bodhidharma brought “the seal of the Buddha mind” from its Indian motherland to the Middle Kingdom. In genealogical lists tracing the lineage of Zen from one generation to the next, Bodhidharma is ranked as the twenty-eighth Indian patriarch and the First Patriarch of Zen in China. The story of the patriarchate and the insignia of the patriarch's dignity—the robe and the begging bowl—constitute an important part of the Bodhidharma legend. For indeed, it is legend we are dealing with here, not only because of the total lack of reliable historical data but also because of the very evident motives that lie behind the story. (Dumoulin 2005, 85)

Dumoulin raises the tension between historical evidence and the often-recited legendary record of Bodhidharma. This is similar to McRae's cautions about Huineng to be discussed later.

In the “Bloodstream Sermon” (attributed by many to Bodhidharma, although some scholars claim the sermon originated after Bodhidharma's lifespan), Bodhidharma says:

> Our nature is the mind. And the mind is our nature. This nature is the same as the mind of all buddhas. Buddhas of the past and future only transmit this mind. Beyond this mind there's no buddha anywhere. But deluded people don't realize that their own mind is the buddha. They keep searching outside. They never stop invoking buddhas or worshipping buddhas and wondering *Where is the buddha?* Don't indulge in such illusions. Just know your mind. Beyond your mind there's no other buddha. The sutras say, “Everything that has form is an illusion.” They also say, “Wherever you are, there's a buddha.” Your mind is the buddha. Don't use a buddha to worship a buddha.
>
> Even if a buddha or bodhisattva should suddenly appear before you, there's no need for reverence. This mind of ours is empty and contains no such form. Those who hold onto appearances are devils. They fall from the Path. Why worship illusions born of the mind? Those who worship don't know, and those who know don't worship. By worshiping you come under the spell of devils. I point this out because I'm afraid you're unaware of it. The basic nature of a buddha has no such form. Keep this in mind, even if something unusual should appear. Don't embrace it, and don't fear it, and don't doubt that your mind is basically pure. Where could there be room for any such form? *Also, at the appearance of spirits, demons, or divine beings, conceive neither respect nor fear. Your mind is basically empty. All appearances are illusions. Don't hold on to appearances.* [Emphasis added.]
>
> If you envision a buddha, a *dharma*, or a

> bodhisattva and conceive respect for them, you relegate yourself to the realm of mortals. If you seek direct understanding, don't hold on to any appearance whatsoever, and you'll succeed. I have no other advice. The sutras say, "All appearances are illusions." They have no fixed existence, no constant form. They're impermanent. Don't cling to appearances, and you'll be of one mind with the Buddha. The sutras say, "That which is free of all form is the buddha." (Pine 1987, 25-27)

Similarly, in Record II, Bodhidharma presents a fascinating exchange in question-and-answer format:

> "If you do not give rise to a demon mind, I can lead you." Question: "what is a demon mind?" Answer: "Closing the eyes [in the cross-legged sitting posture] and entering Samadhi." Question: "[What if] I gather the mind into dhyana so that it does not move?" Answer: "This is bondage Samadhi. It is useless. This holds even for the four dhyanas, each of which is merely one stage of quiescence from which you will return to disturbance again. They are not to be valued. These are created *dharmas, dharmas* that will be destroyed again, not ultimate *Dharma*. If you can understand that intrinsically there is neither quiescence nor disturbance, then you will be able to exist of yourself. The one who is not drawn into quiescence and disturbance is the man of spirit." (Broughton 1999, 41)

Broughton notes that Bodhidharma is referencing the advice in Zen manuals to sit cross-legged and keep the eyes slightly open. "Those who do cross-legged sitting with the eyes closed are said to be in the hungry ghost cave of Black Mountain" (Broughton 1999, 41).

Hershock probes Bodhidharma's significance even further, elaborating on his admonition not to seek after enlightenment or liberation as a goal of practice.

> Given that the feeling of being in want or lacking something is always troubling, this would seem good reason to resist setting up goals and

> destinations. But what if what we want most of all is enlightenment or liberation? Isn't that a goal worth wanting? Bodhidharma's answer is a resounding “no!”—a response that is later taken up by the Chan tradition as a whole and that reaches its rhetorical limit with Linji and his iconoclastic claim that “should you meet 'the Buddha' on the road, kill him!” Bodhidharma does not appeal to the language of “sudden” and “gradual” paths of enlightenment that would eventually dominate Chan discussions of the problem of establishing “enlightenment” as a goal. Instead, he focuses on the incompatibility of seeking and of confidently actualizing the nonduality of our one true nature.
>
> “People of this world,” he says, “are in a whirling pattern of delusion. They are always wanting for something—perpetually seeking. Persons of insight awaken truth. Principle grasped and conventions overthrown, with a pacified heart-mind and unprecedented conduct their forms follow the turnings of the world and the ten thousand things empty.” For Bodhidharma, not seeking means seeing that, finally, there is nothing to grasp or lack since there are no things from which we are inherently separated. Not seeking anything means, then, participating freely in the interdependence and emptiness of all things. (Hershock 2005, 89-90)

Hershock's portrait of the Chan school is such a seductive one—he emphasizes throughout his writings that the Chan adept can handle any situation with confidence and virtuosity. His interpretation of Bodhidharma's advice not to seek anything, could be the key to avoiding *Chan sickness.* So many problems arise when one becomes obsessed with finding or obtaining something.

Dajian Huineng, “Caoxi” (China)

The Sixth Ancestor, Dajian Huineng (Jp., Daikan Eno) (638-713 CE), is a central figure in China's Zen heritage, revered by the five traditional schools of Chinese Zen Buddhism who listed him as their original patriarch. Perhaps what captures most people's admiration for Huineng is the story of his sudden

enlightenment despite a lack of pedigree. An illiterate woodcutter, Huineng had neither education nor social background, yet was able to attain enlightenment in a flash upon hearing the *Diamond Sutra.*

Most of what we know of Huineng's life comes from his teaching known as the *Platform Classic,* also called *The Sutra of Hui-neng, Grand Master of Zen, The Altar Sutra;* or *The Sutra Spoken by the Sixth Patriarch on the High Seat of the Treasure of the Law.* I have most often heard it referred to as *The Platform Sutra* or *The Hui-neng Sutra.* Huineng lived during the T'ang dynasty (619-906 CE), which Thomas Cleary notes was considered “the apogee of Chinese culture.” Thought to be a lecture by Huineng, the *sutra* was recorded by his disciple, Fa-hai, with a copy unearthed among the papers taken from the Dunhuang caves. The manuscript was dated to about a century after Huineng lived. Interestingly, Cleary based his translation on a more detailed manuscript compiled in 1291 by a monk named Tsung-pao (Cleary 1998, 3-4).

Ferguson notes that the events of Huineng's life were “central to political intrigues and factional religious struggles that occurred between the Northern and Southern schools of Zen during the eighth century.” He points out that the link between these intrigues and struggles, plus the scientific dating of the Dunhuang manuscript, raise interesting questions and cast serious doubts as to the credibility of many of the Huineng legends. “The evidence has led many modern scholars, led by the eminent Dr. Hu Shih, to regard the *Platform Classic* as a fabricated document, created by Huineng's spiritual descendant, Shenhui, to provide spiritual legitimacy for his own faction during the turbulent eighth century” (Ferguson

2000, 37). Ferguson's point is echoed by McRae's which parallels Dumoulin's assertions about the Bodhidharma legends.

McRae suggests a similar tension between legend and fact.

> The reader might wonder, for example, whether there is any possibility that the events described might have actually happened. Here we can be definitive: there is no such possibility whatsoever, and the account must be accepted as a brilliant and religiously meaningful bit of fiction. How is it possible to be so certain? First of all, Shenxiu studied with Hongren for a few years at the very beginning of the latter's teaching career, so he was nowhere in sight when the events in question are supposed to have occurred. Second the very notion of selecting an individual successor to serve as "sixth patriarch" would have been inconceivable in the latter years of Hongren's life, since the concept of a Chan "monosuccession"–that there was one and only one orthodox succession of patriarchs– appeared only later, in the teachings of Shenhui. Third, if the matter had been known to Shenhui, who was a master storyteller dedicated to promoting Huineng's identity as sixth patriarch, he certainly would have included it in his writings. We have good evidence to show that in the late 730s Shenhui was ignorant of most of the details of Huineng's life. It is probably, but by no means certain, that Shenhui only thought to contribute to the embellishment of Huineng's life quite late in his own career. (McRae 2003, 67)

The fact that historians can prove the impossibility of certain meetings, relationships, or even documents doesn't necessarily diminish the importance of the event's or object's lessons to the beliefs and practices inspired by them. To paraphrase the well-known advertising campaign, "what becomes a legend most?" It is its retelling and ensconcement within the written and oral histories of the tradition. And while I can admire the sophistication of using modern-day research tools and methodologies to establish the veracity of a story's claims or even an

artifact's worth (e.g., the Shroud of Turin), using historical accounts of key figures' births, deaths and migration patterns to debunk Chan and Zen stories does little to either advance historical understanding or discredit the legends. Perhaps I am guilty of the sin of intellectual idolatry.

> The true thusness of self-nature is the real Buddha.
> Perverse views and the three poisons are Mara.
> In times of delusion, Mara is in the room.
> When right views prevail, then Buddha is in the hall.
>
> If the three poisons are seen in one's nature,
> Then Mara there resides.
> Right views themselves root out the three poisons,
> Demons become buddhas and truth has no falsehoods.
>
> If, in this life, you can realize the *Dharma* gate of sudden awakening,
> Then you can personally see the World-Honored One.
> But if you do not grasp this, and go on seeking Buddha,
> Who knows when you may finally find true nature?
>
> If you understand that you yourself have buddha nature,
> This is the pivotal cause for becoming a buddha.
> Those who don't look in their own minds, but seek Buddha externally,
> Just waste their effort and are ignorant.
>
> The teaching of sudden awakening formerly was transmitted from India.
> To save the people of the world it must be practiced by everyone.
> Those of today who endeavor to offer the world the teachings of Buddhism,
> But know not this principle, are truly muddle-headed fools.
>
> When Huineng finished speaking these three verses, he said to his disciples, “Each of you practice this well. Today I say good-bye to you.

> After I die, don't mourn me in the usual manner of the world. If you receive other people's condolences, offerings, and observances, or you wear mourning clothes, then this is not the true school and you are not my disciples. You should act as though I were still in the world—sitting completely upright, not moving nor resting, without creation or passing away, not going or coming, without positive or negative, not abiding or leaving, but just in solitary peace. This is the great way. After I die, just go on practicing as before, as though I were still here. When I am in the world and you go against my teaching, it is as though my life here as abbot was meaningless."
>
> When he finished saying these words, at the third watch, Huineng suddenly died. He had lived to the age of seventy-six. (Ferguson 2000, 40-1)

This prescription from Huineng for how to keep the practice going is just one of the many instances in *the Huineng sutra* when the doctrines for practice are laid out with stunning transparency. My favorite is his advocacy of using opposition and paradox as expedient means (if someone asks about high, answer with low, etc.). Such skillful means (*upaya*) are also a possible technique for preventing *Chan sickness* as we will see in Chapter 8. Meditation teachers can use *upaya* to counterbalance meditation practices in order to prevent a student from straining, overreaching, or feeling too confident.

In Chapter 2 ("Prajna") of *the Huineng sutra,* the Master included in his address to Governor Wei's assembly:

> Good friends, deluded people expound verbally, wise people practice mentally. There are also deluded people who sit quietly with empty minds, not thinking of anything whatsoever, and claim this is greatness. This sort of person is not worth talking to, because theirs is a wrong view. (Cleary 1998, 17)

In Chapter 4 ("Stabilization and Insight"), the Master said to the assembly:

> Deluded people stick to the appearances of things: they cling to the idea of absorption in one practice as only meaning constantly sitting unmoving, not letting the mind be aroused at random. They identify this with absorption in one practice, but those who make this interpretation are equivalent to inanimate objects. This is a condition that obstructs the Way.
>
> Good friends, the Way should be fluid, free-flowing. Whey then do you stagnate? When the mind does not dwell on things, then the Way is fluid. If the mind dwells on things, that is called self-binding. If you say constant sitting is right, that is contradicted by the fact that Shariputra was scolded by Vimalakirti for sitting quietly in the forest.
>
> Good friends, there are also people who teach sitting, gazing into the mind, and visualizing purity, without moving or getting up, positing merit from this. Confused people do not understand, so they grab onto this and become delusional. There are many like this; they teach each other this way, so we know it is a big mistake. (Cleary 1998, 32)

Yi Wu clarifies, however, that Huineng was not totally denouncing sitting in meditation.

> He simply thought that there is a difference between sitting meditation and understanding the mind and seeing one's true nature. If one practices sitting meditation in the right way, it will help one to cut off outside conditions and more easily understand the mind and see the original nature. But if one practices sitting meditation in the wrong way, it will become an attachment and will be an obstruction to understanding the mind and seeing one's original nature. It will make one fall into a deathlike sitting, exhausting the spirit, which is a kind of sickness. It is easy to feel a cultivation effect in sitting meditation, and most people cultivate the Way of Ch'an are, above all, curious about sitting meditation. It is more difficult to make progress in understanding the mind and seeing the original nature, which is different from merely sitting in

> meditation. People who confuse the two and take a wrong turn in the beginning stray further from the Way the further they go, exhausting themselves at last, but still not understanding their mind or seeing their original nature. They are like a shadow running after its own body, forever unable to touch itself. (Wu 1989, B-4 and B-5)

Mazu Daoyi, "Daji" (China)

Listed by Ferguson as Chinese Zen's Eighth Generation, Mazu Daoyi (709-788 CE) (WG, Ma-tsu) (Jp., Baso Do-itsu) was a student of Nanyue Huairang. Mazu is perhaps only second to Huineng as the most legendary of ancient Chinese Zen masters. Mazu studied with Daman Hongren (the Fifth Ancestor) and received ordination as a Buddhist monk.

> Later, he settled on Mt. Heng, where he met Nanyue Huairang. After ten years of study with Nanyue, he received *Dharma* transmission, then proceeded to travel as a *yunshui* (wandering Taoist priest) the length and breadth of China, perfecting his understanding of the Buddha way. Eventually he settled at Zhongling (now Nanchang City), where students from every quarter came to study with him. (Ferguson 2000, 65)

Also known as Great Master Ma, Mazu was said to have taught one hundred and thirty-nine enlightened successors (Cleary 2005, 566).

Mazu's Zen lineage, the Hongzhou Zen school, became the dominant Zen school in the last part of the Tang dynasty. He was the first Zen teacher thought to have employed the staff "to jolt his students into awakening."

> Unlike some other Zen masters of his time, Mazu did not leave an extensive written record of his teachings. Instead, we know of him largely from imaginative legends that reflect the awesome sense of presence that he conveyed. His purported use of shout and slaps to shock students into

> enlightenment give him a highly revered status in the Chan pantheon. (Ferguson 2000, 65)

Hershock gives a spectacular accounting of the famous Mazu encounter with Huairang:

> Mazu spent several years engaged in the practice of sitting meditation. A spiritual turning point came during a solo meditation retreat at Chuanfa monastery, where he had a life-changing encounter with the seventh patriarch, Huairang. During this period of Chinese history, it was common for solo and group meditation retreats to last for up to sixty days, with a daily regimen of sixteen to eighteen hours of sitting meditation and perhaps three to four hours of chanting or sutra recitation. One can imagine Mazu in the midst of his retreat, sitting wall-like in silent meditation. He becomes aware of a grating sound from outside his meditation hut but continues to sit quietly focused. As the sound continues and grows louder, however, irritation begins to grow. Every so often, the grating sound turns into a torn screech, like that produced by a piece of chalk scraped across a blackboard. Finally, Mazu has had enough. He unfolds his legs, rises, and steps outside to investigate. He sees Huairang seated in the grass outside the hut, methodically scraping a broken roofing tile against a block of stone.
>
> "What are you doing?" he demands to know, almost surely wondering why this monk would be making such an irritating noise outside his meditation quarters.
>
> Huairang looks up casually and replies, "I'm making a mirror."
>
> "A mirror!" Mazu is incredulous. "You can't make a mirror out of a roofing tile!"
>
> "Oh, really? Well, if I can't make a mirror by polishing a roofing tile, what makes you think you can make yourself into a buddha by sitting in meditation?"
>
> Mazu is clearly taken aback by this. "So what should I do?"
>
> "In this situation, it's like there's an ox yoked to a cart. If the cart isn't moving, do you hit the cart or the ox?"

> Mazu isn't quite sure how to answer. Huairang picks up the thread. “Look, you're either training for sitting Chan meditation or you're training for sitting as Buddha. If you're training for sitting Chan meditation, [know that] Chan meditation is not a matter of either sitting or reclining. If you're training to sit as Buddha, [know that] Buddha has no fixed form. According to the teaching of nonabiding, you shouldn't respond [to things] with grasping or rejecting. You, supposedly 'sitting as Buddha,' are just killing Buddha. If you hold onto the sitting form, then that is not penetrating his [naturally fluid] pattern of relating.”
>
> Huairang's criticism hits home. Mazu feels as if he has just drunk ambrosia and wants to know what the function of mind is in encompassing this formless *samadhi*, or attentive virtuosity. Huairang dismisses the idea that there is something special that Mazu must undertake to realize what it means to sit as Buddha. His teaching is like a rain that will soak into Mazu's mind-ground and cause the seeds of awakening already sown there to sprout, enabling Mazu to see his path (*dao*). (Hershock 2005, 111-112)

Yi Wu reminds us that there are two important principles in Mazu's thought: (1) Just this mind is Buddha; and (2) The ordinary mind is the Way. In *The Mind of Chinese Ch'an,* Wu summarizes:

> “Just this mind is Buddha” follows the thought of the Patriarchs after Bodhidharma who emphasized understanding the mind and seeing the original nature. “The ordinary mind is the Way” emphasizes that the Way exists in daily life which is a special principle of Chinese Ch'an that developed after the T'ang Dynasty. (Wu 1989, 47-49)

Or as Suzuki relates of Mazu in a chapter, “From the Chinese Zen Masters”:

> Someone asked: “What is the Buddha?”
> “Mind is the Buddha, and there's no other.” (D.T. Suzuki 1960, 110)

Huangbo Xiyun (China)

Huangbo Xiyun (d. 850 C.E.) (WG, Huang-po) (Jp., Obaku K-un), listed by Ferguson as the Tenth Generation in Zen's Chinese heritage, was the disciple of Baizhang and the teacher of Linji Yixuan. Ferguson notes that Huangbo had a striking physical appearance, with a protruding forehead that was whimsically described as a "large pearl." He was known as a teacher who used few words and simple methods. "Huangbo embodied Mahayana Buddhism's bodhisattva ideal by adhering to the vow to defer the fruit of enlightenment until all other beings can first enjoy it" (Ferguson 2000, 117).

In *Liberating Intimacy,* Peter Hershock discusses Huangbo's teaching in the *Essential Teaching of the Transmission of Mind,* a combination of not-seeking, not cutting off others, and gathering the energy needed to be ready to realize our enlightenment.

> Huang-po [PY, Huangbo] was once reproached for teaching his students to not seek anything while at the same time insisting that they not "cut off others." His interlocutor's assumption being that if we don't seek anything at all, we can hardly engage in the intentional act of helping anyone and so effectively cut them off, Huang-po countered with the observation that, "If you don't seek anything, you're at rest. . . . Look at the empty space before your eyes! Does it make 'cutting off others'?" That is, just as Chuang-tzu maintained that the emptiness of *ch'i* is intimately connected with its ability to "wait on all things" and just as the *Huai-nan-tzu* associates a concentrated or nonmoving mind with conduct that is *wu-wei,* in an appeal to the skylike quality of enlightened mind, Huang-po allies not-seeking and being wholly open to and supportive of others. In short, the absence of seeking must be understood as tantamount to so thoroughly opening up our narration that everything with exception is accommodated and cared for.

> Far from representing a lapse into the blankness of a catatonic's gaze or the unseeing concentration of a yogi who has attained the state of neither perception nor nonperception, not seeking anything is functionally equivalent to not rejecting anything, to not giving birth to or engendering (*sheng*) any distinctions. It is having a beginner's mind which has no inclination to push matters this way or that, but ingenuously (and almost eagerly) welcomes whatever comes its way. Living like this, Huang-po notes, has the beneficial effect of "conserving the mind's energy (*ch'i*)." That is, contrary to what happens when we invest our time and effort in controlling the present or in imagining and maintaining a remembered past or a projected future, when we eschew all seeking we are never drained by whatever befalls us, but profoundly and unreservedly enhanced. (Hershock 1996, 164-165, inner citations omitted)

In *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po,* Blofeld reveals a fascinating passage from the *Wan Ling Record:*

> 37. Our Master said: Those who desire progress along the Way must first cast out the dross acquired through heterogeneous learning. Above all, they must avoid seeking for anything objective or permitting themselves any sort of attachment. Having listened to the profoundest doctrines, they must behave as though a light breeze had caressed their ears, a gust had passed away in the blink of an eye. By no means may they attempt to follow such doctrines. To act in accordance with these injunctions is to achieve profundity. The motionless contemplation of the Tathagatas implies the Zen-mindedness of one who has left the round of birth and death forever. From the days when Bodhidharma first transmitted naught but the One Mind, there has been no other valid *Dharma*. Pointing to the identity of Mind and the Buddha, he demonstrated how the highest forms of Enlightenment could be transcended. Assuredly he left no other thought but this. If you wish to enter by the gate of our sect, this must be your only *Dharma*.
>
> If you expect to gain anything from teachers of other doctrines, what is your purpose in coming

here? *So it is said that if you have the merest intention to indulge in conceptual thinking, behold, your very intention will place you in the clutch of demons.* Similarly, a conscious lack of such intention, or even a consciousness that you do NOT have NO such intention, will be sufficient to deliver you into the demons' power. *But they will not be demons from outside; they will be the self-creations of your own mind.* The only reality is that 'Bodhisattva' whose existence is totally unmanifested even in a spiritual sense—the Trackless One. If ever you should allow yourselves to believe in the more than purely transitory existence of phenomena, you will have fallen into a grave error known as the heretical belief in eternal life; but if, on the contrary, you take the intrinsic voidness of phenomena to imply mere emptiness, then you will have fallen into another error, the heresy of total extinction. (Blofeld 1958, 103-104, emphasis added)

Linji Yixuan, "Huizhao" (China)

Linji Yixuan (d. 866) (WG, Lin-chi) (Jp., Rinzai Gigen), Eleventh Generation in Zen's Chinese heritage, was a disciple of Huangbo Xiyun. Ferguson notes that "[a]s the founder of the Linji school of Zen (in Japanese, Rinzai), his tradition remains, along with the Caodong school, as one of the two lineages that survive to the present day." (Ferguson 2000, 155)

> [W]hile Linji claims that as soon as he opens his mouth he has made a mistake—that even the intention to talk about Ch'an is evidence of error—he was famous for demanding that his students unhesitatingly engage him in conversation. If they paused to think about their reply or to consider the meaning of his remarks, Lin-chi would as often as not yell at or strike them with the demand that they "Speak, speak! Give me one true word!" Cutting off the route of language is not, therefore, the equivalent of becoming speechless, but is refusing to follow the dictates of linguistic convention, imaging that 'you' and 'I' are not aspects of a seamless whole just because a river of words and

> concepts apparently separate us. Just as a knife can be used to carve a buddha-statue or to murder a rival, language can be used as a liberative technique—something the *Vimalakirti Sutra* makes quite clear. What is not permissible if this is to occur is that we take what language refers to as anything other than a set of more or less stable conventions which can be dispensed with when necessary. (Hershock 1996, 108, inner citation omitted)

> Linji is thus bitingly derisive in his criticism of "shave-headed [monks] who have stuffed themselves with food and then sit down to meditate and practice contemplation, seeking to stop the flow of thoughts, hating noise and seeking out silence." If our buddha-nature is not something to be sought outside, neither is it something to be found inside. When we sit in meditation, Linji urges us to "just sit" – that is, to not make anything. When we act, he urges us to "just act." This is conducting ourselves *wuwei*, or without precedents or goals, without setting up objectives for how things are supposed to turn out as a result of our agency.
>
> Linji claims at one point that there "is no Buddha, no *Dharma*, no training, and no realization." With characteristic directness, he says that undertaking training to be exemplary bodhisattvas is just another form of making karma. But as he also indicates that the true person of no rank is able to make use of karma in all situations, we should not assume that there is no place in Linji's Chan for disciplined training and practice. As in the case of each of the Chan patriarchs before him, Linji's awakening was followed by years of continued training under his spiritual master. (Hershock 2005, 127-8)

In Part Two of the *Lin-chi lu (The Recorded Sayings of Ch'an Master Lin-chi Hui-chao of Chen-chou),* at chapter 17, Master Lin-chi, instructs the group on having faith in themselves and not looking for something outside.

> Whatever confronts you, don't let yourself be imposed on. If you entertain even a moment of doubt, the devil will enter your mind. Even a

> bodhisattva, when he starts doubting, is prey to the devil of birth and death. Learn to put a stop to thoughts and never look for something outside yourselves. When an object appears, shine your light on it. Just have faith in this thing that is operating in you right now. Outside of it, nothing else exists.
>
> Your mind in one moment of thought creates the three-fold world. Depending on conditions, you experience its various environments, and it divides itself to become the six dusts. In the way you now respond and utilize it, what do you lack? In the space of an instant you enter purity or enter defilement, enter the halls of Maitreya or enter the lands of the three eyes. You wander at ease everywhere, for you see that these are all empty names. (Watson 1993, 41)

Interestingly, the use of *kung an* (Ch., PY *gong 'an*) (Jp., *koan*), often associated with the Linji school (Jp., *Rinzai school*) but also employed by some Soto Zen practitioners, can also be a means of preventing a type of Chan sickness. *See* Chapter 8.

Guifeng Zongmi (China)

Guifeng Zongmi (WG, Tsung-mi) (780-841 CE), Twelfth Generation in Zen's Chinese heritage according to Ferguson, was a disciple of the Sichuan school Zen master Suizhou Daoyuan. He is more often linked to the Heze Zen school of Heze Shenhui. Zongmi was a prolific scholar, perhaps the leading Buddhist scholar of the late eighth and early ninth centuries. Ferguson notes, "[h]e possessed an intimate understanding of the various Buddhist schools and doctrines, and made important contributions to the advancement of Buddhism in China. He was also the fifth ancestor of the Buddhist Huayan school, which based its teachings on the *Huayan* ("Flower Garland") *Sutra"* (Ferguson 2000, 245).

Broughton lays out some of Zongmi's numerous contributions to Buddhist scholarship, including the *Chan Letter,* the *Chan Prolegomenon,* a commentary on the *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana,* a commentary on the *Thunderbolt-Cutter Perfection of Wisdom Sutra,* an abridged commentary to the *Perfect Awakening Sutra,* an essay on the *Huayan Sutra,* a commentary on the *Dharmagupta-vinaya,* a commentary and subcommentary on Vasubandhus' *Thirty Verses on Consciousness Only,* and several others (Broughton 2009, 6-7).

I found Zongmi's description of the master-student transmission to be emblematic of how the master can guide the student toward successful meditation practice and how to avoid the many possible pitfalls. In section 20 of the *Chan Prolegomenon,* Zongmi writes:

> In a master-student transmission, [the master] must know the medicine [for each and every] disease. This means that all instructional teaching devices inherited from the past *first show the original nature [kaishi benxing] and then require reliance on this nature to practice dhyana [yixing xiuchan].* In most cases, when the nature is not easily awakened to, it is due to the grasping of characteristics. Thus, if [a master] wants to reveal this nature, he must first eradicate grasping [on the part of the student]. In [the master's] teaching devices for eradicating this grasping, he must [employ a type of rhetoric in which] common person and noble one are both cut off, merits and faults are both gotten rid of, in the precepts there is neither violation nor observance, in dhyana there is neither concentration nor distraction, the thirty-two marks [of a buddha] are all like flowers in the sky, and thirty-seven parts of the path are all a dream or illusion. The idea is that, if [the master] enables [the student] to have a mind free of attachment, then [the student] can practice dhyana. [But] junior trainees and those of shallow knowledge *just grasp these [Chan] phrases [of the rhetoric of showing the*

> *original nature] as the ultimate path [jiujing dao].* Furthermore, as to the gate of practice *[xiuxi zhi men],* because most people are self-indulgent and indolent, [masters] further speak a great deal of taking joy [in the path] and wearying [of this world]. They criticize passion and anger and commend diligence, regulation of the body and regulation of breath, and the sequence of coarse and subtle [characteristics]. *When novices hear this* [rhetoric of diligent gradual practice], *they become deluded about the function of original awakening and single-mindedly grasp characteristics.* Only those [trainees] of great ability and fixed will serve their masters for the full course [of training]. They then attain the purport of [both] awakening and practice. [Trainees] of a light, shallow nature, *upon hearing only one idea,* [i.e., either the original nature or gradual practice], *say that they already have had enough [ji wei yi zu].* (Broughton 2009, 19)

Muller ranks Zongmi as one of the most important figures in East Asian Buddhist history, especially in his contributions that today's scholars study for the development of Chan and Hua-yen "in the context of the intellectual religious climate of his times." Involved in both scholastic and meditational branches of Buddhism, Zongmi was revered as a patriarch by both the Hua-yen school and the Ho-tse line of Chan. Muller notes that Zongmi was "deeply interested in both the practical and doctrinal aspects of Buddhism, and especially concerned about the means for the harmonization of the views of those who tended toward exclusivity in either direction (Muller 1999, 15).

Xuansha Shibei (China)

Xuansha Shibei (835-908 CE) (Jp., Gensa Shibi), Thirteenth Generation in Zen's Chinese heritage according to Ferguson, was a disciple of Xuefeng Yicun. Born in ancient Fuzhou, Shibei, a fisherman, left his lay life to enter a temple on

Lotus Mountain. He became known as “Ascetic Bei,” because he wore only a patched robe and straw sandals, and often fasted instead of taking the evening meal. As Xuefeng's close disciple, Xuansha helped him build his practice center. His enlightenment was said to have been triggered by reading the words of the *Surangama Sutra* (Ferguson 2000, 262).

> Zen master Xuansha said to the monks, “All of you are seeing great peril. You see tigers, knives, and swords threatening your life, and you're experiencing unlimited terror. What's it like? It is like the world is painting itself with images from hell, making tigers, knives, and swords, all right there in front of you, and you feel terrified. But if you are now having such experiences then it's a terror that arises from your own personal illusions, and not something that someone else is creating for you. Do you want to understand these illusions and confused feelings? If so, then know that you have the diamond-eye. If you know this, then you realize that all the things of the world don't truly exist. So where could tigers, wolves, knives, and swords threaten you? If Shakyamuni had dealt with this like you're doing he'd never have made it.
>
> “This is why I say to you that the eye of a true practitioner envelops the entire world. It encompasses the whole universe. Not a single strand of hair leaks out. So where would there be a single thing left for you to see or to realize? This transcendence! This miraculous state! Why don't you investigate it?” (Ferguson 2000, 274)

The images of “tigers, knives and swords” underscore the terrifying nature of one's personal illusions. Certainly this characterization, though different from calling uncomfortable visions 'demons,' reveals that Xuansha's image of the 'eye of the true practitioner' includes the ability to overcome such delusions.

Dogen Zenji (Japan)

Dogen Zenji (1200-1253 CE) (also Dogen Kigen, or Eihei Dogen), born in Kyoto, Japan, traveled to China and studied in the Caodong school. It was the forerunner of what Dogen later founded in Japan as the Soto school. One of Dogen's most famous works, the *Treasury of the Eye of the True Dharma* (Jp., *Shobogenzo*) laid out the parameters of Buddhist practice and enlightenment in its 95 fascicles. In the *Zazen-Gi* fascicle, Dogen provides a detailed description of how to practice *zazen*:

> Practicing Zen is *zazen*. For *zazen* a quiet place is suitable. Layout out a thick mat. Do not let in drafts or smoke, rain or dew. Protect and maintain the place where you settle your body. There are examples from the past of sitting on a diamond seat and sitting on a flat stone covered with a thick layer of grass.
>
> Day or night the place of sitting should not be dark; it should be kept warm in winter and cool in summer.
>
> Set aside all involvements and let the myriad things rest. *Zazen* is not thinking of good, not thinking of bad. It is not conscious endeavor. It is not introspection.
>
> Do not desire to become a buddha; let sitting or lying down drop away. Be moderate in eating and drinking. Be mindful of the passing of time, and engage yourself in *zazen* as though saving your head from fire. On Mt. Huangmei the Fifth Ancestor practiced *zazen* to the exclusion of all other activities.
>
> While sitting *zazen*, wear the kashaya and use a round cushion. The cushion should not be placed all the way under the legs, but only under the buttocks. In this way the crossed legs rest on the mat and the backbone is supported with the round cushion. This is the method used by all buddha ancestors for *zazen*.
>
> Sit either in the half-lotus position or in the full-lotus position. For the full-lotus put the right foot on the left thigh and the left foot on the right

> thigh. The toes should lie along the thighs, not extending beyond. For the full-lotus position, simply put the left foot on the right thigh.
>
> Loosen your robes and arrange them in an orderly way. Place the right hand on the left foot and the left hand on the right hand, lightly touching the ends of the thumbs together. With the hands in this position, place them next to the body so that the joined thumb-tips are at the navel.
>
> Straighten your body and sit erect. Do not lean to the left or right; do not bend forward or backward. Your ears should be in line with your shoulders, and your nose in line with your navel.
>
> Rest your tongue against the roof of your mouth, and breathe through your nose. Lips and teeth should be closed. Eyes should be open, neither too wide, nor too narrow. Having adjusted body and mind in this manner, take a breath and exhale fully.
>
> Sit solidly in samadhi and think not-thinking. How do you think not-thinking? Nonthinking. This is the art of *zazen*.
>
> Zazen is not learning to do concentration. It is the *dharma* gate of great ease and joy. It is undefiled practice-enlightenment. (Tanahashi 1995, 29-30)

In the *Gyoji-1* chapter of the *Shobogenzo* (Chapter 30), Dogen urges one to maintain a strong practice of *zazen* practice, to wit:

> Buddhist patriarchs widely transcend in experience all gods and demons, and gods and demons have no means by which to look up at them; so it is hard [for gods and demons] to draw near to a Buddhist patriarch. Nansen said, "The practice of this old monk has been so weak that I have been spotted by a demon." Remember, to be spotted by a demon of no training is due to lacking power in one's practice. (Nishijima 2005, Book 2, 120)

Keizan Jokin (Japan)

Keizan Jokin, Japan (1258-1325) was the second of the great founders of the Soto Zen sect in Japan after Dogen Zenji. Keizan and his disciples helped transform Zen from a monastic religion to one that transcended the various layers

of society. He is also credited with endorsing the training of women in Buddhism.

In “Zazen Yojinki: Notes on What To Be Aware Of In Zazen,” Keizan provides this advice:

> Don't wear luxurious clothing or dirty rags. Luxurious clothing gives rise to greed and then the fear that someone will steal something. This is a hindrance to practitioners of the Way. Even if someone offers them to you, to refuse is the excellent tradition from ancient times. If you happen to have luxurious clothing, don't be concerned with it; if it's stolen, don't bother to chase after it or regret its loss. Old dirty clothes should be washed and mended; clean them thoroughly before putting them on. If you don't take care of them you could get cold and sick and hinder your practice. Although we shouldn't be too anxious about bodily comforts, inadequate clothing, food, and sleep are known as the “three insufficiencies” and will cause our practice to suffer.
>
> When you are sitting in *zazen*, do not prop yourself up against a wall, meditation brace, or screen. Also, do not sit in windy places or high, exposed places, as this can cause illness.
>
> Sometimes, when you are sitting, you may feel hot or cold, discomfort or ease, stiff or loose, heavy or light, or sometimes startled. These sensations arise through disharmonies of mind and breath-energy. Harmonize your breath in this way; open your mouth slightly, allow long breaths to be long, and short breaths to be short, and it will harmonize naturally. Follow it for awhile and a sense of awareness arises and your breath will be natural. After this, continue to breathe through the nose.
>
> The mind may feel as if it were sinking or floating, it may seem dull or sharp. Sometimes you can see outside the room, the insides of the body, the forms of Buddhas or Bodhisattvas. Sometimes you may believe that you have wisdom and now thoroughly understand all the sutras and commentaries. These extraordinary conditions are diseases that arise through disharmony of mind and breath. When this happens, sit placing the mind in

the lap. When the mind sinks into dullness, raise attention above your hairline or before your eyes. When the mind scatters into distraction, place attention at the tip of the nose or at the tanden [hara]. After this, rest attention in the left palm. Sit for a long time and do not struggle to calm the mind and it will naturally be free of distraction.

Although the ancient Teachings are a long-standing means to clarify the mind, do not read, write about, or listen to them obsessively because such excess only scatters the mind.

Generally, anything that wears out bodymind causes illness. Don't sit where there are fires, floods, or bandits, by the ocean, near bars, brothels, where widows or virgins live, or near where courtesans sing and play music. Don't live near kings, ministers, powerful or rich families, people with many desires, those who crave name and fame, or those who like to argue meaninglessly. Although large Buddhist ceremonials and the construction of large temples might be good things, one who is committed to practice should not get involved.

Don't be fond of preaching the *Dharma*, as this leads to distraction and scattering. Don't be delighted by huge assemblies or run after disciples. Don't try to study and practice many different things.

Do not sit where it is too bright or too dark, too cold or too hot. Do not sit where pleasure-seekers or whores live. Go and stay in a monastery where there is a true teacher. Go deep into the mountains and valleys. Practice *kinhin* by clear waters and verdant mountains. Clear the mind by a stream or under a tree. Observe impermanence without fail and you will keep the mind that enters the Way.

The mat should be well padded so that you can sit comfortably. The practice place should always be kept clean. Burn incense and offer flowers to the *Dharma* Protectors, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and your practice will be protected. Put a statue of a Buddha, Bodhisattva, or arhat on the altar and demons of distraction will not overwhelm you.

Remain always in Great Compassion, and

> dedicate the limitless power of *zazen* to all living beings.
>
> Do not become arrogant, conceited, or proud of your understanding of the Teachings; that is the way of those outside of the Way and of usual people. Maintain the vow to end afflictions, the vow to realize Awakening and just sit. Do nothing at all. This is the way to study Zen.
>
> Wash your eyes and feet, keep bodymind at ease and deportment in harmony. Shed worldly sentiments and do not become attached to sublime feelings about the Way. Though you should not begrudge the Teachings, do not speak of it unless you are asked. If someone asks, keep silent three times; if still they ask from their heart, then give the teachings. If you wish to speak ten times, keep quiet nine; it's as if moss grew over your mouth or like a fan in winter. A wind-bell hanging in the air, indifferent to the direction of the wind—this is how people of the Way are.
>
> Do not use the *Dharma* for your own profit. Do not use the Way to try to make yourself important. This is the most important point to remember. (Loori 2004, 44-46)

This amazingly specific passage from Keizan contains a wealth of practical advice. His instructions for handling dullness and distraction are invaluable for anyone sitting for long periods. His advice on paying heed to the three insufficiencies (inadequate clothing, food, and sleep) points to the very real possibility that physical sickness can be caused in Chan/Zen practice by failing to prepare the physical environment and maintain your own physical well-being via practicing good daily habits of self-care.

Master Han Shan (China)

In *The Secrets of Chinese Meditation,* Lu K'uan Yu devotes an entire chapter to "Self-Cultivation According to the Ch'an (Zen) School." In a portrait of

Master Han Shan (1546-1623 CE), he recounts an instance wherein the master experienced “Ch'an illness”:

> One day, after a meal, while he was standing, suddenly he entered the state of samadhi and his body and mind disappeared completely and were replaced by a vast brightness, like a round mirror wherein his surroundings appeared. He then felt at ease in this serenity without meeting any hindrance from externals. He was alone and did not know how long he was in this samadhi state, and when he came out of it, his hearth was covered with a layer of dust. He opened the Surangama Sutra to check his awakening. Soon afterwards, he contracted the Ch'an illness and rid himself of it after sitting in meditation for five consecutive days and nights, after which he experienced an indescribable bliss. (Luk [Lu K’uan Yu] 1984, 77)

Lu K'uan Yu explains in a note that:

> The Ch'an illness is sometimes contracted after a major awakening, when the vital principle does not circulate freely through the psychic centres in the body. The meditator is then seized with an irresistable desire to dance, jump, gesticulate, hum, talk and act strangely without apparent reason. Words that he has read before come to him in an endless succession and cannot be stopped. (Luk [Lu K'uan Yu] 1984, 77)

Master Yuanyun Jiexian (China)

In a work entitled, “Discourse on Chan Training” Yuanyun Jiexian (1610-1672 CE) provides detailed guidance for how the Chan master should shape the practitioner early on in order to send the practitioner on the correct path. He directs the master to have the practitioner meet with the master in his room for face-to-face instruction in order to temper and train the practitioner. In a section entitled, “Coming Down to the Hall and Giving Guidance,” Master Yuanyun explains about demonic sicknesses:

> What does it mean to protect the practitioners against demonic sicknesses? The nature of the consciousness of beginning practitioners is bound to have myriad starting points of craziness and confusion. That is why, when showing them [how to practice] *huatou*, the master must cut off the pass above. Once this pass is tightly shut and the master has rigorously searched out and removed [the practitioner's deluded ideas of meditation work], the specious thoughts in the practitioner's cognitive ground will not be able to drag along their shadows. For this reason the practitioner will only awaken to the Way and will not get attached to delusions. If perchance the master does not observe the practitioner's capacity and assigns a *huatou* without paying attention to the barrier at the pass, then the practitioner's karmic consciousness will fly around in confusion and engage in crazy, chaotic, discursive thinking—[images of] familiar people and scenes will burst out of the practitioner's dark [subconscious]. Bizarre sights and sounds will make even more chaos in the practitioner's field of consciousness. Beginning practitioners do not have the wisdom to see through these things or the power in the Path to control them. They may become suspicious or they may become terrified; they may feel happy or they may feel sad. Suddenly the pass is opened and demonic phenomena come into play. (Section omitted) If the Chan master is diligent and scrupulous in offering guidance and deliberately protects [his practitioners against such things], then there is no worry that this will happen. (Sheng-yen 2006, 44-45)

Hakuin Ekaku (Japan)

The writings of Japanese Zen master Hakuin (1685-1768 CE) suggest that Chan sickness can result from practicing too rigorously, from pushing too hard in order to reach an enlightenment experience. In *Wild Ivy,* Waddell's translation of Zen master Hakuin's chapter entitled, “Zen Sickness,” details his struggles and search for relief. Hakuin describes an enlightenment experience that left him in an amazed state where he was physically demonstrative, flagging his arms and

stamping his feet. His initial joy at having this experience led him to embark upon a regimen of austerities, which is a sign of being out of balance. Hakuin's descriptions of trying too hard, practicing too diligently, and resorting to ascetic practices in the reach for enlightenment illustrate that *Chan sickness* can be the unwanted result.

> On that day I first committed myself to a life of Zen practice, I pledged to summon all the faith and courage at my command and dedicate myself with steadfast resolve to the pursuit of the Buddha Way. *I embarked on a regimen of rigorous austerities, which I continued for several years, pushing myself relentlessly.*
>
> Then one night, everything suddenly fell away, and I crossed the threshold into enlightenment. All the doubts and uncertainties that had burdened me all those years suddenly vanished, roots and all—just like melted ice. Deep-rooted karma that had bound me for endless kalpas to the cycle of birth-and-death vanished like foam on the water.
>
> It's true, I thought to myself: the Way is not far from man. Those stories about the ancient masters taking twenty or even thirty years to attain it—someone must have made them all up. For the next several months, I was walking on air, flagging my arms and stamping my feet in a kind of witless rapture.
>
> Afterward, however, as I began reflecting upon my everyday behavior, I could see that *the two aspects of my life—the active and the meditative—were totally out of balance.* No matter what I was doing, I never felt free or completely at ease. I realized I would have to rekindle a fearless resolve and once again throw myself life and limb together into the *Dharma* struggle. With my teeth clenched tightly and eyes focused straight ahead, *I began devoting myself single-mindedly to my practice, forsaking food and sleep altogether.* (Waddell 1999, 87-89, emphasis added)

After Hakuin's taste of an enlightenment experience, perhaps a *kensho*, he throws himself into a rigorous practice and subjects himself to austerities in order to chase after the enlightenment experience again. But such a relentless pursuit seems counter to the Buddhist embrace of the middle path. The temptation to engage in “rigorous austerities” is great when one sees Chan practice as a means to radical simplicity. But Hakuin's grasping for enlightenment is what so many Chan masters warn against. And ascetic practices, while countenanced in certain yogic and tantric disciplines, are thought to be counterproductive in Chan/Zen practice.

Master Hsu Yun (China)

Chinese Chan Master Hsu Yun (1850-1959) taught his senior monks his *Methods of Practice in the Chan Hall.* For the “Essentials of Chan Practice” portion of his teaching, Hsu Yun instructed:

> Our everyday activities are executed with the Path itself. Is there anywhere that is not a place for practicing the Path? A Chan Hall should not even be necessary. Furthermore, Chan practice is not just sitting meditation. The Chan Hall and Chan sitting meditation are for sentient beings with deep karmic obstructions and shallow wisdom.
>
> When one sits in meditation, one must first know how to regulate the body and mind. If they are not well regulated, then a small harm will turn into an illness and a great harm will lead to demonic entanglements. This would be most pitiable. Walking and sitting meditation in the Chan Hall are for the regulation of body and mind. There are other ways to regulate the body and mind, but I will talk about these two fundamental methods.
>
> When you sit in the lotus position, you should sit naturally straight. Do not push the waist forward purposely. *Doing so will raise your inner heat, which later on could result in having sand in the corner of your eyes, bad breath, uneasy*

> *breathing, loss of appetite, and in the worst case, vomiting blood.* If dullness or sleepiness occur, open your eyes wide, straighten your back and gently move your buttocks from side to side. Dullness will naturally vanish. If you practice with an anxious attitude, you will have a sense of annoyance. At that time you should put everything down, including your efforts to practice. Rest for a few minutes. Gradually, after you recuperate, continue to practice. *If you don't do this, as time goes on you will develop a hot-tempered character, or, in the worst case, you could go insane or fall into demonic entanglements.*
>
> There are many experiences you will encounter when sitting Chan, too many to speak of. However, if you do not attach to them, they will not interfere with you. This is why the proverb says: “See the extraordinary yet do not think of it as being extraordinary, and the extraordinary will retreat.” *If you encounter or perceive an unpleasant experience, take no notice of it and have no fear.* If you experience something pleasant, take no notice of it and don't give rise to fondness. The “Surangama Sutra” says: “If one does not think he has attained a supramundane experience, then this is good. On the other hand, *if one thinks he has attained something supramundane, then he will attract demons.”* (Hsu Yun 2009, www.hsuyun.net/discourses.html, 1-2, emphasis added)

In Master Hsu Yun's counsel, then, there are physical sicknesses that can result from improper posture in *zazen*, as well as the possibility to attract demons if you attach to a supramundane experience. 'Taking no notice of a pleasant experience' and 'not giving rise to fondness' seem to indicate that Hsu Yun advocated a certain arm's length handling of states achieved during meditation. The challenge is to see the extraordinary but not to think of it as extraordinary. This is probably easier said than done.

Summary of Key Agreements/Disagreements of Patriarchs

In a lecture on contemplative ritual, Alan Watts described the features of Zen meditation technique this way:

> Sit quietly and be with your breath, your mind, and all your feelings.
>
> It doesn't matter whether you are sitting cross-legged or on your knees with your legs folded underneath you. The point is to settle into a posture that is stable and comfortable. You can cross your legs in front of you, or if you are limber you may wish to try the half-lotus or full-lotus position. You can sit on a cushion with your knees bent and legs on either side, or you can sit in a chair. The idea is to be comfortable and find a position that you can maintain effortlessly.
>
> As you settle in, remember that although stillness is emphasized in meditation, this does not mean that you should hold still in a rigid way. Becoming still physically helps one to find stillness of mind, but if you need to move, get comfortable, so that you can settle even more deeply.
>
> Keep your back upright and your head erect, but let your arms relax. Rest the left palm in the right palm, and put your thumbs together as if you were holding an egg. Your hands should be positioned at your belly with your thumbs just below the navel.
>
> If you are sitting cross-legged you may wish to rock back and forth for a moment to find your natural center. If you are sitting in a chair, plant your feet on the ground so that you are grounded.
>
> Your mouth should be closed, the eyes lowered slightly.
>
> When you have found a stable posture, allow your awareness to sink into your breath and to find the bottom of your breath; just gently pay attention to your breathing. Allow the breath to come and go as it may.
>
> That's all you need to do. Your body will become still, and your mind will naturally, at some point, become still as well.
>
> That is the essential process of meditation. (Watts 2000, 121-122)

If you read Watts' description of the process of meditation closely, you can discern his influences by Dogen and D.T. Suzuki. Fortunately, Watts allows for Western practitioners to acknowledge bodily needs ("...that does not mean that you should hold still in a rigid way"). This was an important lesson to learn in my own Zen practice. My initial meditation instruction, combined with thorough observation of my fellow meditation students on the mat, impressed upon me the importance of restraint and a formal, motionless devotion. With time, and perhaps some follow-up instruction, I learned that it is perfectly acceptable to acknowledge one's bodily limitations and stretch legs, lean, sneeze, etc., to respond to the body's needs during *zazen*.

Regarding preoccupation with everything Zen, Habito provides an example from the *Blue Cliff Record.*

> The sixth entry of the *Pi-yen-lu* or "Blue Cliff Record" collection of koans begins with a question posed by Master Yun-men: "I am not asking you about the previous fifteen days. Now say something about these latter fifteen days."
>
> The concrete reference of the koan, first of all, is to the waxing moon (first fifteen days) and the waning moon (the latter fifteen days). The break-off point here is the full moon or the experience of *kensho* or self-realization. Thus, the "previous fifteen days" refer to the period before enlightenment, a period of searching and digging and delving and "Mu-ing," wherein one applies total effort to enable the True Self to come to full light.
>
> The "latter fifteen days" begin with and presuppose the experience of enlightenment. That experience is the discovery of one's True Self as one with all, as being no different from each and every particularity in the whole universe. This is the experience of the "full moon" of one's life. Indeed, in this experience, replete with joy and peace and

> inner satisfaction, one sees the *concrete* meaning of one's existence, not as an intellectual idea, but as a down-to-earth *fact*. With this, one becomes fully at peace and at home with oneself and the whole universe, and one is content even in the face of death. For the enlightened person, and for that person alone, every day truly is a good day. The point of the koan is to show one's realization of this "good day." "Now let your servant depart in peace, because my eyes have seen your salvation." The words of the prophet Simeon in Luke 2:29-32 reflect this kind of joy and sense of fulfillment at having come to what one has awaited and longed for over a long and arduous period. I am reminded of other words that have somehow become a part of me: "And now my own joy is made complete" (John 3:30).
>
> Though varying with each individual, this experience of the "full moon" is so fraught with emotional overtones and undertones that it can take time for the sheen and luster to settle. A misdirected step can afflict one with what is usually called "Zen sickness," in which one keeps referring to this experience out of context or keeps throwing around Zen terms and phrases in conversations, even when they are not called for. One can come close to being a Zen maniac, trying to convert everybody in sight to this "very wonderful thing." Indeed, Zen may have done wonders for one, but for the bystander or onlooker or unfortunate victim of Zen talk it may simply be a smack of the exotic. The Latin term for moon is *luna*, the root of the word *lunatic*.
>
> A mere hairbreadth distance from this, however, is the healthy Zen path, which calls for further unflagging exercise in polishing and rounding off the rough edges. The post-*kensho koan* training is thus a vital element and can make for the subtle difference between a pathological and a healthy Zen mind. (Habito 2004, 45-6)

Similarly, Yamada provides an insightful look at one's preoccupation with Zen in the case of Joshu's "Wash Your Bowls" in the *Gateless Gate:*

> THE CASE
>
> A monk asked Joshu in all earnestness, "I have just entered this monastery. I beg you, Master, please

> give me instructions." Joshu asked, "Have you eaten your rice gruel yet?" The monk answered, "Yes, I have." Joshu said, "Then wash your bowls." The monk attained some realization.

Yamada offers this clarification:

> In conceptual form, Joshu's questions would read, "Have you tasted kensho yet?" The monk's reply, "Yes, I have," means "Yes, I am already enlightened." Joshu replies, "Then wash your bowls." Now, what does that mean?
>
> Drawing attention to one's accomplishments is usually nauseating. This is especially true in Zen. When one first experiences enlightenment, one is apt to feel more or less proud and perhaps become a little pompous. This is not completely unreasonable because one has just experienced a world that unenlightened people cannot even imagine. If that pride swells, however, one becomes afflicted with what is known as **Zen sickness.** It is manifested by certain esoteric mannerisms, such as an excessive use of Zen terms which ordinary people don't understand. Or it maybe apparent through rather boisterous laughter, as though one were completely free from all attachment, or by the flamboyant use of ironic or even cynical words. All this is most disgusting in a Zen person. It is, therefore, very important to wash away all the glamor of enlightenment. (Yamada 1990, 40-41; emphasis added)

Looking for clues to difficulties encountered in meditation practice throughout the ages involves some reading of tea leaves, but it is fascinating to try and surmise what the early patriarchs were warning about. If you were to read the writings of the Chan and Zen patriarchs chronologically, you would also follow the spread of Buddhism from India through China to Japan.

There are so many guideposts left by the patriarchs, and an in-depth comparison would probably reveal a fair number of contradictions from one to the next. But as an exercise in comparison, I give you this short list:

No suffering is self-caused. (Nagarjuna)

Why worship illusions born of the mind? (Bodhidharma)

In times of delusion, Mara is in the room. (Huineng)

Just this mind is Buddha. (Mazu)

If you have the merest intention to indulge in conceptual thinking, behold, your very intention will place you in the clutch of demons. (Huangbo)

If you entertain even a moment of doubt, the devil will enter your mind. (Linji)

In most cases, when the nature is not easily awakened to, it is due to grasping of characteristics. (Zongmi)

You see tigers, knives and swords threatening your life, and you're experiencing unlimited terror. . . . A terror that arises from your own personal illusions . . . (Shibei)

Remember, to be spotted by a demon of no training is due to lacking power in one's practice. (Dogen)

Do not become arrogant, conceited, or proud of your understanding of the Teachings; that is the way of those outside of the Way and of usual people. (Jokin)

To avoid all of these troubles, it is up to the Chan master to spare no effort and to come to the hall every day and give the practitioners diligent guidance. (Yuanyun)

I began devoting myself single-mindedly to my practice, forsaking food and sleep altogether. (Hakuin)

If you practice with an anxious attitude . . . you could go insane or fall into demonic entanglements. (Hsu Yun)

Clearly, the writings of the Chan patriarchs represent their efforts to help practitioners avoid pitfalls such as struggling with demons, physical pain and discomfort, and conceit and its resulting alienation from others. Particularly upon reading Hakuin's extensive descriptions of *Zen sickness,* I became aware that straining to achieve results (enlightenment, special powers or abilities, elevated status) in meditation becomes an obstacle to one's practice. This is an incredibly difficult concept to rationalize and assimilate, particularly when so much of the widely disseminated, and perhaps erroneously encapsulated, Buddhist and Zen literature holds out enlightenment as the ultimate prize for engaging in a diligent meditation practice. Dogen's response to this was that *zazen* is [itself] undefiled practice-enlightenment. This fits nicely with Bodhidharma's vision, as eloquently interpreted by Hershock, that not seeking anything (including the Buddha, enlightenment, etc.), means you can then participate “freely in the interdependence and emptiness of all things” (Hershock 2005, 90).

CHAPTER 4

CONTEMPORARY CHAN AND ZEN MASTER VIEWS ON MEDITATION AND CHAN SICKNESS

In undertaking intensive retreats, even if for a mere seven days, it is absolutely necessary to have the guidance of a qualified teacher. We often say that intense practice can incite "demonic" states. These "demons" do not come from without. They come from within us, from our conflicting thoughts, afflictions, and defilements; and if they are not properly identified and handled, they can lead us into worse and worse conditions. Under these circumstances—especially after practice has borne some fruit—there is an even greater need for full confidence in the master. Whatever he or she tells you to do, you should do. If he or she tells you to take a rest, you cannot say, "I am very energetic now. I want to continue." If he or she tells you to practice harder, you cannot say, "I'm feeling lousy now. I want to rest." It is not that masters delight in being dictators. It is just that under these circumstances their experience tells them what is happening, and they are the only ones capable of offering reliable help.

-Master Shen-yeng
Hoofprint of the Ox
"Prerequisites for Chan Practice"
(Sheng-yen 2001a, 178)

Writing in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, most of the luminaries consulted for this chapter have experience as meditation masters: Shunryu Suzuki (Suzuki-roshi), Master Nan Huai-Chin, Venerable Master Hsuan Hua, and Master Sheng-yen. I have also included views expressed by Alan Watts and D.T. Suzuki, as they were instrumental in introducing the philosophy and religion of the East to Western audiences. Additionally, I have included anecdotes from Janwillem van de Wetering, a Dutch writer who, though perhaps better known for his crime fiction set in Amsterdam, wrote extensively about his personal experiences as a Westerner living and meditating in a Japanese Zen monastery. While all of these figures speak authoritatively to the difficulties that can be encountered during Chan/Zen meditation, it is Master Sheng-yen who speaks directly to the

particulars of *Chan sickness.* Sheng-yen also shares in abundant detail the specific requirements for a Master's involvement with the student's practice and development.

Alan W. Watts (1915-1973)

Watts gives a Western, down-to-earth account of how to approach meditation. Of particular note is his cautions to merely watch thoughts and not go out of your way to name them. Also noteworthy is his admonition not to expect any result from meditation, not to look at it as a mode of self-improvement. This sentiment has been modified somewhat in popular culture in the twenty-first century, where meditation is a tool in the self-improvement arsenal.

> When you realize that you have come to your wit's end, you can begin meditation. Or meditation happens, and that happening is simply the watching of what is, of all the information conveyed to you by your exterior and interior senses, and even the thoughts that keep chattering on about it all.
>
> You don't try to stop those thoughts, you just let them run as if they were birds twittering outside, and they will eventually become tired and stop.
>
> But don't worry about whether they do or don't. Just simply watch whatever it is that you are feeling, thinking, or experiencing – that's it. Just watch it, and don't go out of your way to put any names on it. This is really what meditation is.
>
> You are in meditation in an eternal present, and you are not expecting any result. You are not doing it to improve yourself, because you found that you can't. Your ego can't possibly improve you because it is what's in need of improvement, and your ego can't let go of itself because it is a complex of thoughts called "clinging to one's self." When it is finally understood that it is unable to achieve a transformation of consciousness, or the vivid sense of union of individual and cosmos, it just evaporates. (Watts 2000, 116-117)

Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki (1870-1966)

In *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism,* D.T. Suzuki details the daily life of Zen monks in a chapter called "The Meditation Hall and the Monk's Life." He makes the point quite eloquently that physical work is a necessary counterbalance to sitting meditation.

> The Meditation Hall (*zendo*) is where Zen educates its monks. To see how it is regulated is to get a glimpse into the practical and disciplinary aspect of Zen. It is a unique institution and most of the main monasteries in Japan of the Zen sect are provided with it. In the life of the Zen monks in the Meditation Hall we are reminded of the life of the *Sangha* in India.
>
> The system was founded by the Chinese Zen master, Hyakujo (Pai-chang, 720-814), more than one thousand years ago. He left a famous saying which had been the guiding principle of his life, "A day of no work is a day of no eating," which is to say, "No eating without working." When he was thought by his devoted disciples to be too old to work in the garden, which had been his favourite occupation, they hid all his garden tools, as he would not listen to their repeated remonstrances. He then refused to eat. "No work, no living." At all the Meditation Halls work, especially that which is commonly regarded as menial, is the vital element in the life of the monk. It thus implies a great deal of manual labour, such as sweeping, cleaning, cooking, fuel-gathering, tilling the farm, or going about begging in the villages far and near. No work is considered to be beneath their dignity, and a perfect feeling of brotherhood prevails among them. They believe in the sanctity of manual work; no matter how hard or how mean the work may be, they will not shun it, and they keep themselves in every way they can; for they are no idlers, as some of the so-called monks or mendicants are, as for instance in India.
>
> *Psychologically considered, this is splendid; for muscular activity is the best remedy for the dullness of mind which may grow out of the*

meditative habit, and Zen is very apt to produce this undesirable effect. The trouble with most religious recluses is that their mind and body do not act in unison; their body is always separated from their mind, and the latter from the former; they imagine that there is the body and there is the mind and forget that this separation is merely ideational, and therefore artificial. The aim of the Zen discipline being to annul this most fundamental discrimination, it is always careful to avoid any practice which tends to emphasize the idea of onesidedness. Satori in truth consists in reaching the point where all our discriminatory notions are done away with, though this is by no means a state of emptiness. The sluggishness of mind which is so frequently the product of quietistic meditation, we can thus see, is not at all conducive to the maturing of satori, and those who want to advance in the study of Zen have naturally to be always on guard in this respect lest it should finally altogether stop the fluidity, as it were, of mental activity. This is at least one reason why Zen followers object to the mere practice of Dhyana. The body kept busy will also keep the mind busy, and therefore fresh, wholesome, and alert.

Morally, any work involving an expenditure of physical force testifies to the soundness of ideas. Especially in Zen is this true; abstract ideas that do not reflect themselves forcibly and efficiently in practical living are regarded as of no value. Conviction must be gained through experience and not through abstraction. Moral assertion ought everywhere to be over and above intellectual judgment; that is, truth ought to be based upon one's living experience. Idle reverie is not their business, insist the followers of Zen. They, of course, sit quietly and practice *zazen*; that must be done if they are to assimilate whatever lessons they have gained while working. But as they are opposed to “chewing the cud” all the time, they put into action whatever reflections they have made during hours of quiet-sitting and thus test their validity in the vital field of actualities. It is my strong conviction that if the Zen monastery did not put faith in working and keeping the blood of the monks circulating, the study of Zen would have sunk into the level of a mere

> somniferous and trance-inducing system, and all the treasures garnered by the masters in China and Japan would have been cast away as of no more value than heaps of rotten stuff. (D.T. Suzuki 1964, 118-119, emphasis added)

Suzuki emphasizes this point: the meditation student must move. When he speaks of "working and keeping the blood of the monks circulating," he is advocating a physicality that counterbalances the quiet-sitting periods. This may account for the usefulness of *kinhin* (Jp., "walking meditation") periods that are often alternated with periods of *zazen* in Western Zen center meditation schedules.

In his *Manual of Zen Buddhism,* D.T. Suzuki includes a synopsis of the Surangama Sutra, and prefaces it with this explanation of the White Umbrella mantra, thought to be a protection from evil spirits that visit during meditation.

> *The Ryogonkyo, or Surangama Sutra*
>
> There are in the Chinese Tripitaka two sutras bearing the title, "Surangama", but they are entirely different in contents. The first one was translated into Chinese by Kumarajiva between 402-412 and consists of two fascicles. The second one in ten fascicles was translated by Paramiti in 705, and this is the one used by the Zen and also by the Shingon. The reason why it is used by the Shingon is because it contains the description of a mandala and a mantram called "Sitatarapatala" (white umbrella), the recitation of which, while practicing the Samadhi, is supposed to help the Yogin, as the Buddhas and gods will guard him from the intrusion of the evil spirits. But the general trend of thought as followed in this sutra is Zen rather than Shingon. It was quite natural that all the commentaries of it belong to the Zen school. The terms used here are somewhat unusual—especially those describing the Mind. The sutra is perhaps one of the later Mahayana works developed in India. It treats of highly abstruse subjects. Below is a synopsis of it. (D.T. Suzuki 1960, 64-5)

> ….
> 19. While disciplining himself in meditation the Yogin is liable to be visited by all kinds of evil beings whereby he is constantly assailed by hallucinations of various natures. These are all due to highly-accentuated nervous derangements, and the Yogin is advised to guard himself against them.
>
> When the Yogin has all these mental disturbances well under control, his mind acquires a state of tranquility in which his consciousness retains its identity through his waking and sleeping hours. The modern psychologist would say that he is no more troubled with ideas which are buried, deeply repressed, in his unconsciousness; in other words, he has no dreams. His mental life is thoroughly clear and calm like the blue sky where there are no threatening clouds. The world with its expansion of earth, its towering mountains, its surging waves, its meandering rivers, and with its infinitely variegated colours and forms is serenely reflected in the mind-mirror of the Yogin. The mirror accepts them all and yet there are no traces or stains left in it—just one Essence bright and illuminating. The source of birth and death is plainly revealed here. The Yogin knows where he is; he is emancipated. (D.T. Suzuki 1960, 71-2)

Shunryu Suzuki (1904-1971)

Shunryu Suzuki, also known as Suzuki-roshi, founder of the San Francisco Zen Center, writes in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* about the proper way to view meditation, and how to approach it with a beginner's mind.

> In the beginner's mind there is no thought, "I have attained something." All self-centered thoughts limit our vast mind. When we have no thought of achievement, no thought of self, we are true beginners. Then we can really learn something. The beginner's mind is the mind of compassion. When our mind is compassionate, it is boundless. Dogen-zenji, the founder of our school, always emphasized how important it is to resume our boundless original mind. Then we are always true to ourselves, in sympathy with all beings, and can actually practice.

So the most difficult thing is always to keep your beginner's mind. There is no need to have a deep understanding of Zen. Even though you read much Zen literature, you must read each sentence with a fresh mind. You should not say, “I know what Zen is,” or “I have attained enlightenment.” This is also the real secret of the arts: always be a beginner. Be very very careful about this point. If you start to practice *zazen*, you will begin to appreciate your beginner's mind. It is the secret of Zen practice. (S. Suzuki 2001, 22)

If you want to obtain perfect calmness in your *zazen*, you should not be bothered by the various images you find in your mind. Let them come, and let them go. Then they will be under control. But this policy is not so easy. It sounds easy, but it requires some special effort. How to make this kind of effort is the secret of practice. Suppose you are sitting under some extraordinary circumstances. If you try to calm your mind you will be unable to sit, and if you try not to be disturbed, your effort will not be the right effort. The only effort that will help you is to count your breathing, or to concentrate on your inhaling and exhaling. We say concentration, but to concentrate your mind is not the true purpose of Zen. The true purpose is to see things as they are, to observe things as they are, and to let everything go as it goes. This is to put everything under control in its widest sense. Zen practice is to open up our small mind. So concentrating is just an aid to help you realize “big mind,” or the mind that is everything. If you want to discover the true meaning of Zen in your everyday life, you have to understand the meaning of keeping your mind on your breathing and your body in the right posture in *zazen*. You should follow the rules of practice and your study should become more subtle and careful. Only in this way can you experience the vital freedom of Zen. (S. Suzuki 2001, 32-3)

When you are practicing zazen, do not try to stop your thinking. Let it stop by itself. If something comes into your mind, let it come in, and let it go out. It will not stay long. When you try to stop your thinking, it means you are bothered by it. Do not be

bothered by anything. It appears as if something comes from outside your mind, but actually it is only the waves of your mind, and if you are not bothered by the waves, gradually they will become calmer and calmer. In five or at most ten minutes, your mind will be completely serene and calm. At that time your breathing will become quite slow, while your pulse will become a little faster.

It will take quite a long time before you find your calm, serene mind in your practice. Many sensations come, many thoughts or images arise, but they are just waves of your own mind. Nothing comes from outside your mind. Usually we think of our mind as receiving impressions and experiences from outside, but that is not a true understanding of our mind. The true understanding is that the mind includes everything; when you think something comes from outside it means only that something appears in your mind. Nothing outside yourself can cause any trouble. You yourself make the waves in your mind. If you leave your mind as it is, it will become calm. This mind is called big mind. (S. Suzuki 2001, 34-5)

In our practice we have no particular purpose or goal, nor any special object of worship. In this respect our practice is somewhat different from the usual religious practices. Joshu, a great Chinese Zen master, said, "A clay Buddha cannot cross water; a bronze Buddha cannot get through a furnace; a wooden Buddha cannot get through fire." Whatever it is, if your practice is directed toward some particular object, such as a clay, a bronze, or a wooden Buddha, it will not always work. So as long as you have some particular goal in your practice, that practice will not help you completely. It may help as long as you are directed toward that goal, but when you resume your everyday life, it will not work. (S. Suzuki 2001, 75)

Wherever we go, we should not lose this way of life. That is called "being Buddha," or "being the boss." Wherever you go you should be the master of your surroundings. This means you should not lose your way. So this is called Buddha, because if you exist in this way always, your Buddha himself. Without trying to be Buddha you

> are Buddha. This is how we attain enlightenment. To attain enlightenment is to be always with Buddha. By repeating the same thing over and over, we will acquire this kind of understanding. But if you lose this point and take pride in your attainment or become discouraged because of your idealistic effort, your practice will confine you by a thick wall. We should not confine ourselves by a self-built wall. So when *zazen* time comes, just to get up, to go and sit with your teacher, and to talk to him and listen to him, and then go home again—all these procedures are our practice. In this way, without any idea of attainment, you are always Buddha. This is true practice of *zazen*. Then you may understand the true meaning of Buddha's first statement, "See Buddha nature in various beings, and in every one of us." (S. Suzuki 2001, 132)

Suzuki-roshi's admonishment above not to take pride in your attainment echoes the pitfall described earlier by Habito and Kapleau (*see* Chapter One).

Venerable Master Hsuan Hua (1918-1995)

In *The Chan Handbook,* a collection of talks on meditation, Master Hsuan Hua, founder of the Dharma Realm Buddhist association, the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, the International Translation Institute, and other education centers, details the appearance of demons:

> *Go with care. Avoid demonic possession.*
> The meditation topic we investigate is one false thought. Our mind is full of many scattered thoughts. By using the method of fighting poison with poison, we use one false thought to stop all our many false thoughts. Slowly, one by one, we eradicate false thoughts, so they no longer have influence on us. At that time, no matter what state arises, we will not be deluded by it. We will distinguish things clearly and not become possessed by demons. The ancients said, *It would be better to go without enlightenment for a thousand lifetimes, than to be possessed by a demon for even a single day.*

> As we cultivate Chan meditation, we must be cautious and circumspect, and not get carried away. We must be proper, magnanimous, and forthright, so that demons have no chance to trouble us. Idle thoughts open the door to demons, but the meditation topic is the *Dharma*-treasure that exorcises those demons. (Hua 2004, 68-69)

Janwillem van de Wetering (1931-2008)

Dutch author Janwillem van de Wetering shares his experiences as a Westerner learning about Zen at a Japanese monastery. In *The Empty Mirror,* van de Wetering recounts a physical ailment brought on by his meditation practice.

> A new pain began to bother me, a pain which increased in intensity and which attacked me especially when I visited the lavatory; a burning swollen feeling. By careful groping I found a swelling, about the size of a pigeon's egg. Gerald wasn't in the monastery that day and I didn't have sufficient command of Japanese to explain to the head monk what ailed me. I asked permission to use the telephone, an old-fashioned set which was hung on a dark well in the porch of the temple. Peter was at home, and I told him about my painful discovery.
>
> "A pigeon's egg?" Peter asked.
>
> I gave more details and he began to laugh.
>
> "A pigeon's egg, ha ha. What an extraordinary association. That's a hemorrhoid; they are caused by meditation and going to the toilet in a hurry because you don't like flies and stench. The veins near your anus are bleeding and probably inflamed."
>
> "Yes," I said irritably. "And what does one do about it?"
>
> "Nothing," said Peter. "Wait till I come. I'll bring you some pills and ointment and if it doesn't disappear you'll have to see the doctor. Perhaps you need an operation, which would be painful, but probably it won't be necessary. Nearly all the monks suffer from hemorrhoids and nobody has ever been to hospital. A pigeon's egg! Ha ha. The idea!"
>
> Peter thought my idea so funny that he told

> everybody about it. The monks grinned when they saw me and held, without ever getting tired of the joke, an imaginary pigeon's egg between the thumb and index finger. The head monk slapped me on the back and roared with pleasure, and the master smiled at me cheerfully when he saw me busy in the garden. I went to see the wooden statue of the Zen master in the main temple and presented my complaint.
>
> Why should I get idiotic, distasteful diseases when I start looking for the truth? Why don't you help me instead of allowing me being plagued by sagging veins? I am seeking final mystery, the most beautiful and glorious goal a man can aim at, so why should I be rewarded with hemorrhoids?"
>
> The statute didn't say anything but it represented a man, a man like me, who had also looked for truth once. Perhaps he had pimples or the itch when he lived under the bridge, among beggars. I felt comforted. At least the statue hadn't laughed. (van de Wetering 1973, 59-60)

In a later work, *Afterzen*, he describes this physical discomfort differently in a conversation with an Indian guru named Baba at Logan Airport:

> He even meditated from time to time, although meditation, Baba told me, is not all it's cracked up to be. When overdone it gives you a pain in the ass. Had I noticed?
>
> I had. Prolonged *zazen* gave me chronic hemorrhoids. Baba told me the human body is not designed to sit in the double or even the half lotus position for long periods of time. The postures put excessive strain on the rectum. I found that easy to believe. Preparation H is a staple in Zen monasteries, together with Maalox, for eating too hot meals too fast, peer pressure by zealots, too little sleep, and the relentless master's constant urging to solve a koan create mental tensions that ulcerate Zen stomachs. (van de Wetering 1999, 4)

I found van de Wetering's complaint about hemorrhoids to be refreshing in its candor. I have not come upon this warning in any other Chan or Zen literature.

In *A Glimpse of Nothingness,* van de Wetering provides a detailed description of a fearful vision experienced during meditation:

> I still had fears, even if I couldn't name them they would be there nevertheless. Fear of death perhaps, even though death still seemed a long way off. Fear of the monsters I had seen during meditation.
>
> It had happened that particular night. I saw the head of a small dog, a head with a lot of hair. At first the head seemed quite harmless, friendly even, but the eyes were cold and without expression. I tried to get back to my concentration but the head kept on staring at me. It became a composite of other pictures which grew from and in the dog's skin. The more I looked the more I saw. There were a lot of heads and some of them belonged to real horrors. Bats with fangs, leering demons, skeletons, old wrinkled women with running sores. Still, I hadn't been really frightened, I had been visited by these visions before and I knew that, provided I didn't try to look away, the pictures would fade and eventually disappear. And perhaps the exhibition had amused me. A famous alcoholic has claimed that the mice, lizards and chameleons which he saw during delirium tremens hadn't frightened him at all. The animals could perform quite cleverly and he enjoyed watching them. (van de Wetering 1975, 56-57)

In consideration of my hypothesis (as stated in the title of this dissertation, "... and the Master's Role in Its Diagnosis, Treatment and Prevention"), I was buoyed by van de Wetering's nuanced exploration of the dynamics of the relationship—spoken and unspoken—between student and master. He provides a splendid account of the *sanzen* practice, wherein the student and master meet to discuss *kung an* (Jp., *koans*). As will be discussed in Chapter 8, some teachers feel that *koan* practice can be tailored to effectively prevent *Chan sickness.*

> Guided by the jikki's eternal bell we went outside and walked to the house nearby where Peter waited, Peter the Master. *Sanzen* is the direct contact

between master and disciple in formal Zen training. When this type of Buddhist training first began, in ancient China, contact between master and disciple had been very free, there were no fixed times; *sanzen*, like lightning, could strike anywhere and anytime. The master would plant his koans when his disciples least expected it. They might be chopping wood together, or out on a walk, and suddenly the question was there and the disciple would try to formulate an answer and the master would laugh, shake his head and suggest that the student try again, later. But when the monasteries grew and the number of disciples increased *sanzen* had to be caught in a discipline. People, whenever they live in groups, automatically make rules. Now the masters receive their disciples at set times. Peter, like the Japanese masters, continued the tradition. But his influence wasn't limited to *sanzen*-time. He might strike any time of the day. And koans aren't solved in *sanzen*-rooms only.

My turn came. I didn't feel tense as I ran up the stairs. Quickly I remembered what I would have to do. Three full prostrations as a greeting to the master, bow when coming into the room, bow again when leaving the room. This extreme politeness has meaning. The disciple reminds himself that he is nothing, and knows nothing. He, from the jail of his individuality, his subjectivity, faces the ultimate, the insight of the master. Buddhism admits that the disciple, after all is something. But whatever he is, he is no more than a forever changing mass of properties and habits, temporarily caught in an ever changing body of flesh. The master is very different, a being of another kind. The master also inhabits an ever changing body of flesh but he is no longer human for he has found the way to freedom and has discovered the final point of that way. The master can no longer be defined and his humanity is a mask. When the disciple prostrates his body on the floor of the *sanzen*-room, he creates, for himself, a certain distance. Perhaps the daily contact with the master has led him to believe that the master is another human being, somebody he can talk and joke with. But *sanzen*, even when it is full of words and jokes, is no ordinary conversation. *Sanzen* connects the deepest part of both master and

> disciple, the part which is realized in the master and may be realized in the disciple. The disciple bows down in the dust, not only for the master but also for himself. *Sanzen* is, perhaps, a breakthrough. The protecting layers which cover and form the personality of the disciple are broken, peeled off, like an onion can be peeled off. And when the last layer goes and nothing remains, then. . . .
>
> The *sanzen*-room was no novelty to me. It copied the old master's room in the Kyoto monastery. When I faced the figure opposite I knew I had not changed masters. There was no difference. The human form facing me, quietly, in deep concentration, vibrating power and peace, didn't differ from the form of the old master. At that moment I could never have said, "Hello, Peter."
>
> I said my *koan* in Japanese, as I had been taught. When the master rang his bell I made my three farewell prostrations. Outside, on my way back to the *Zendo*, I realized that I had spent less than a minute in the *sanzen*-room. I had received the usual treatment. But *sanzen* doesn't consist of bows and bells. Anything can happen. In Japan I had lived through a *sanzen* which must have lasted close to half an hour. When two people meet each other in concentration the result can be staggering. (van de Wetering 1975, 29-30)

Master Sheng-yen (1930-2009)

It was the discovery of Master Sheng-yen's extensive description in a chapter of *Zen Wisdom* (2001b) entitled, "Chan Sickness" that I came to appreciate that: (a) there are different varieties; (b) the different varieties have unique causes and attributes; (c) the conditions exist today rather than being only historical or matters of legend. Sheng-yen details *Chan sickness* in response to a student's questions:

> **Chan Sickness**
> QUESTION: I have heard of people falling into a state of mind called *Chan sickness* after practicing hard for a long time. What is *Chan sickness?*
> SHIFU: First of all, *Chan sickness* is rare. People

who meditate an hour or two a day simply do not practice intensely enough for problems to arise. Even if you have psychological problems or are anxious for attainment, there will not be any serious problems. Only when you practice hard and continuously for a long time are problems likely to arise, but most of the time they will not. If people know they are prone to have weird mental visions that they do not understand, it is probably best that they not practice too intensely.

Chan sickness can result from four kinds of causes: the first is physiological, the second is psychological, the third is karmic obstruction, and the fourth is outside sources, such as spirits. Depending on the cause, *Chan sickness* may manifest in different ways. If the source is physiological, the problem should also be observable when the person is not meditating. In fact, it is likely that the problem existed before the person started to meditate. Meditation sometimes brings such problems to the fore.

Chan sickness of the body can arise from many causes. One is an incorrect attitude toward the practice. For example, if you are hoping through meditation to develop supernormal powers, you are in for trouble. Some people hope through meditation to stay young forever or to develop super-sexual powers. Such attitudes if taken to the extreme can lead to health and possibly mental problems as well.

Other reasons for physiological problems are incorrect posture and unnatural breathing. If you sit with a curved back, you may experience back and neck pain. If you force or try to control your breathing, you may stress your diaphragm. Improper nutrition, such as when food intake is not regulated, may also lead to problems. Some people try to sit for a long time without eating or drinking. If you reach a point in meditation where you have no sense of time, as in samadhi, lack of nutrition may not matter, but if time still exists in your mind, you should not skip meals.

Lack of sleep can also cause *Chan sickness.* Some people think that meditation is a replacement for sleep, so they forego sleep altogether or cut back on their sleep time. This can lead to serious

problems, especially with the nervous system. If one sits for too long without adequate movement or exercise, the body's energy channels can become blocked.

Many people hear that meditation will improve their health, alleviate or cure ailments, and release blocked energy channels. This is possible, but it takes time. People who are in poor health before they start meditating have to be careful. If people are looking for quick results, and spend too much time meditating before they are able to handle it, their condition could worsen.

The second source of *Chan sickness,* psychological problems, can occur if one is over-anxious about achieving results. Someone may desperately want to achieve enlightenment or acquire supernormal powers. Sickness of this nature comes from vexation, stemming from obsessive greed, hatred, pride, or doubt. Everyone encounters these feelings and desires, but in most of us it does not get out of hand. Such obsessions can lead to *Chan sickness* unless there is proper guidance.

If you are overly anxious about getting results from your practice, it will be easier to experience bad psychological states or become physically ill. If such problems do arise, say this to yourself: “Whatever comes I do not need and do not want. Whatever appears I will neither like nor fear.” It is difficult advice to follow, but it is the attitude you should cultivate.

The third source of *Chan sickness* is karmic obstructions. Everything may be fine until people start practicing with intensity. Then they suffer headaches, a tightening in the chest, fearful hallucinations, or other symptoms. Such *Chan sickness* comes from previous bad karma. Medical or psychological care will not help. It is best to stop meditating intensely. It is not necessary for such people to give up meditating altogether, but they should approach it more casually. They should also recite repentance verses before and after meditation. If a person can do repentance practice with sincerity, then the sickness may gradually disappear. Repentance, however, is not enough; they must also make vows. Repentance is for past bad actions. Making vows is for the future. One

should vow not to practice solely for one's own benefit, but for the benefit of all sentient beings.

STUDENT: Some so-called teachers claim that they can take your bad karma away from you so that you can live a less burdened life. I thought that one's karma was one's karma and could not be given or taken away.

SHIFU: It is possible to take someone's karma away by transferring merit to them, but only for a short time. It is like owing someone money when you are in a tight squeeze. Someone can pay for you, temporarily getting you off the hook, but you still owe the money. In the end, you are responsible for your own karma. Only when your practice is extremely deep and your mind and world-view changes can your bad karma go away. You may still suffer, but you will no longer see it as suffering.

SHIFU: The fourth source of *Chan sickness,* demonic obstructions or *maras*, is extremely rare. Demonic obstructions can refer either to external forces or to internal mental conditions. When I talk about demonic obstructions and demonic states, I am usually referring to something that people conjure up in their own minds. It stems from wrong thinking, following the wrong path, having the wrong view or attitude. For most people, interference by external spirits simply does not happen. However, in those rare circumstances when there is external interference from spirits, it goes hand in hand with wrong thinking. Practitioners who follow the correct path, have a correct view of the *Dharma*, and who are not over-anxious or greedy, will not be disturbed by such forces.

People who are disturbed by outside influences usually have bodies and personalities that are accessible to spirits. They serve as mediums or channels for outside entities. They are vulnerable even if they do not meditate, but when they meditate, they may be even more vulnerable. Spirits may attach themselves to people and direct their thinking and actions as if they were puppets. Discontinuing practice would likely have no effect upon the spirit's influence.

Interference from outside entities can take place with or without the awareness of the

practitioner. Being aware of an outside influence is better than not being aware. People may think that there is a spirit, deity, bodhisattva, or buddha using their bodies to spread the *Dharma*. They know they are not the ones who are acting. The second situation, being unaware is more serious. Such people may think they are enlightened. If they are told that their experiences and behavior do not stand up against the teachings of the Buddha, they will not believe you. Such people have tremendous confidence in themselves and can usually influence many people. These people are said to have fallen into demonic states.

Most serious is when a person feels he or she has reached buddhahood. Insanity is not even as bad. At least then it is clear that there is a problem and the person can be helped. People who think they are buddhas or bodhisattvas do not believe they need help and can lead many others down erroneous pathways.

If the problem were due to external spirits, it would be quite useless to seek help from physicians or psychotherapists. Other methods are necessary. One method is to drive away the spirit with another external force, such as a mantra or a spell. This is not reliable, however. The second method is for the disturbed person to do repentance practice. If the person is not capable of doing it, others can repent instead, but it will not be as effective. The effectiveness of repentance practice depends on the severity of the case.

As we said before, *Chan sickness* is very rare, and in most cases, they are of more mundane origin, such as physical, psychological, and karmic influences. If the problem is physiological, then seeking help from a doctor can be useful. If the problem is mental illness, guidance from an appropriate therapist or teacher is needed. The practitioner, however, must have faith that the therapy will be of benefit.

If the problem is psychological, so long as misconceptions are corrected, there will be no problems resulting from meditation. Self-doubt, anxiousness, or anger in moderate amounts, are not severe psychological problems. If the problem is physiological, it is possible that the person will not

heal completely. It should be understood that I am talking about severe and special cases. Most people never encounter such problems. Pain in the legs, or trouble with energy channels, are not severe physiological problems.

Whether someone recovering from *Chan sickness* can continue intensive practice depends on the person and the situation. If all symptoms disappear, then it is all right to continue. If the symptoms persist to any degree, it is best to forego intensive meditation until symptoms disappear altogether.

STUDENT: Is it possible that a person could be deemed insane by society, but in fact only be in a Chan state of realization?
SHIFU: Yes, it is possible. Such people are neither insane nor suffering from *Chan sickness.* Rather, they temporarily view the world so differently their words and actions may seem odd. Others may think them insane, but in fact they are fine. This stage will pass and they will return to what is considered normal behavior.

STUDENT: Can a practitioner who does not have the proper guidance suffer from *Chan sickness* if he or she has a no-self experience?
SHIFU: It is possible. If the teacher is not around and the person has an experience of emptiness, but not necessarily enlightenment, he or she could develop mental problems or become deeply confused. That is why practice traditions such as Chan, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism stress the need for a qualified teacher. That is why there is a tradition of transmission from teacher to student. There is a process that one needs to go through when one walks a spiritual path. Be wary of someone who claims to be enlightened and offers to teach you, yet has not received transmission or has not been recognized by a qualified instructor.

STUDENT: You have said that whenever we experience anything strange, we should just ignore it. You have also said that we should regard anything or anyone that helps us as the gift of a bodhisattva.
SHIFU: When practitioners encounter interference

> from external things—people, situations, other beings—and it does not obstruct their practice, but in fact makes them practice even harder, then external obstructions are beneficial. As such they should be thought of as gifts from bodhisattvas (Sheng-yen 2001b, 225-232).

Master Nan Huai-Chin (b. 1918)

In *Working Toward Enlightenment* (1993), Nan Huai-Chin speaks to the details of meditation practice in this section from a chapter on "Mind and External Form."

> I always try to make everyone mindful of this: right when you are sitting down, and you are drawing up your legs into the cross-legged posture, at that very instant, is it or is it not very good? But after you have sat down properly, it is not so good. Why is this? Because after you have seated yourself properly, you become aware "I am sitting in meditation." You notice your breath is not right, your body is not right. But at that moment when you just sat down, there seemed to be a bit of a feeling of abandoning the myriad objects, of not being concerned with anything at all. After you have crossed your legs properly, everything comes into your thoughts: you think of achieving enlightenment, you think of having your posture upright and correct, you think of not engaging in false thoughts. False thoughts arrive, and you want to chase them away. After you've chased them away, you start thinking again. Alas! Why must you chase them away? After you chase them away, again there are false thoughts. No matter what you do, you are always sitting there playing with ghosts.
>
> In fact, you simply must let external objects fall away spontaneously so that the thing which is left does not move. This is what the (*Surangama*) sutra calls the one that remains "when objects are cast away." These are the instructions that Buddha gave to us so directly. It is because we confuse them that we "falsely enter into the various planes of existence," that we revolve around in the six planes of existence. (Huai-Chin 1993, 24-25)

The Importance of the Master's Guidance

Sheng-yen, more than any other author I have located to date, expounds upon the qualities necessary for a good teacher. He is adamant that the student seek out a master who has received the transmission and has been recognized by a qualified instructor. He also underscores the importance of constantly observing and inquiring about the practitioner's use of the method.

> One of the most important functions of the master is to provide encouragement for students when their vigor and confidence in themselves seem to flag. Sometimes this may require stern words or an angry demeanor; at other times, a soft and consoling disposition. Through such encouragement the master helps students over difficult hurdles.
>
> A second way in which the master assists the practitioner is through concrete advice on the use of the meditation method itself. Even though one may have heard explanations of *huatou* and silent illumination practice a hundred times over, it is still very easy for one to distort the practice by falling into old habits or using an approach of one's own invention. If this sort of thing goes unattended, it can have bad consequences. Thus, the master must constantly observe and inquire about the practitioner's use of the method, answer any questions, and remind him or her of its correct use.
>
> Finally, an experienced teacher provides a confident gauge for measuring the students' progress, giving them an authoritative means to confirm whether what they have experienced is good or bad, genuine or false. In this respect, the master also offers a safe refuge from wrongful paths—those paths that can lead to the various physical and mental problems known as “demonic states” or “Chan illness.” Above all, you should realize that faith in the master is faith in the “right path” of the Buddha's *Dharma*, which the master embodies. You must test and walk that path for yourself, but let the master be your refuge and guide. (Sheng-yen 2001a, 177-179)

Master Sheng-yen's picture of the experienced teacher as one who acts as a gauge for measuring the students' progress is vital to the understanding of the significance the teacher has in detecting and preventing *Chan sickness.* By shepherding the students as they progress on the practice path, the teacher can steer them away from the range of physical and mental problems associated with *Chan sickness.*

In a section of *Attaining the Way* entitled, "Remarks at the End of Retreat," Master Sheng-yen advises his practitioners to treat meditation experiences as illusions.

> Chan practice really begins when you return home after retreat. Take what you have learned and put it to use. If you practice according to the *Dharma*, you will not fall into delusion. You may have experienced certain physical and mental phenomena, perhaps the supernormal—this sometimes occurs with hard practice. Don't covet small gains, cling to your experiences, or seek to repeat them. If you cling to them, trying to demonstrate or rely on powers you gained, you will experience great affliction; you can really go wrong and fall into delusion. That is not practicing according to the *Dharma*. If you just treat meditation experiences as illusions, you will be safe and in accord with the *Dharma*. (Sheng-yen 2006, 217)

I can appreciate Sheng-yen's advice for how to assimilate Chan practice into your everyday world once the retreat is over. Even after a Saturday morning *zazen* sitting at my neighborhood *sangha*, there is a tendency to glow a bit, to see everything with fresh and open eyes on the walk home. But by the time I reach the front door of my home, I know that I cannot cling to the memory of the *zazen* experience. I must move forward and get on with things. Sheng-yen notes, "The

point of Chan is to be empowered in the midst of daily life." (Sheng-yen 2006, 221)

CHAPTER 5

CONTEMPORARY WESTERN PSYCHOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF MEDITATION

Buddhist philosophy and meditation practice offer many tools for profound spiritual development, but they do not address all the psychological concerns of Westerners. Without more culturally appropriate interventions such as psychotherapy, even some advanced meditators continue to suffer from anxiety, depression, isolating narcissism, or numbed disengagement.

-Harvey B. Aronson
Introduction
Buddhist Practice on Western Ground
(Aronson 2004, xiii)

My mind is like a bad neighborhood—I try not to go there alone.

-Anne Lamott
quoted by Jack Kornfield in The Wise Heart
(Kornfield 2008, 141)

Before exploring some notable Western psychologists' views on the integration of Buddhist meditation and psychology, I wanted to include for contrast a few words from Geshe Tashi Tsering, who developed the Foundation of Buddhist Thought, a core course of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT). Tsering employs concepts from the *Abhidharmakosha*, as well as the texts of the *Pramana* and the *Vajrayana* to present a complete picture of the mind. Even as he does so, he recounts the Buddha's advice not to simply accept his words literally, "but to examine them 'as a goldsmith would test the quality of gold.' Although Buddhist practitioners see the importance of the teachings of the Buddha and other great masters on such subjects, they will not accept them without undertaking their own investigation" (Tsering 2006, 7). I consulted Harvey Aronson's writings because as a psychotherapist he examines how Buddhist meditation practices fare within

Western culture. Aronson notes that “[w]e learn that we cannot simply apply a technique for sitting meditation and expect it to improve every aspect of our lives automatically” (Aronson 2004, 12). Reading of Aronson's own experience of coming to meditation with expectations that it could address all of his needs certainly rings true with me, paralleling thoughts I had when first encountering Zen meditation practice and the expectation that it could resolve all psychological conflicts and obviate the need for therapy. Psychiatrist Mark Epstein (2007) delivers a wealth of insightful experience in working with Buddhist meditation in the context of psychological practice, examining the processes underlying specific practices and noting where Western practitioners may experience particular difficulties. Psychotherapist David Brazier (1995) presents a helpful understanding of the early difficulties that may be experienced when one first sits down on the mat to meditate. Claire Myers Owens (1992) not only explains the various classes and levels of consciousness touched by meditation, she provides stunning firsthand accounts of some challenging/painful meditation experiences that I would classify as instances of *Chan sickness.* Daniel Goleman (1992) provides a glimpse of conditions that meditators often experience following a pseudonirvana state that can often be both emotionally and physically painful and filled with terror and dread. Yasuo Yuasa (1987) explores the Eastern mind-body theory as it is applied in clinical medicine. “He notes that “[m]editation brings to the surface the complexes and emotions sunk in the unconscious region, freeing them and ultimately dissolving them by slowing the conscious activities connected with the cerebral functions” (Yuasa 1987, 207). Yuasa's views on the

potentials of cultivating a mind-body approach are fascinating, especially in his proposition that "all diseases are open to both treatment by, and research procedures of, psychosomatic medicine" (Yuasa 1987, 204). The validity of this approach seems to be borne out by recent cancer center treatment offerings that have expanded to include mind-body and other holistic treatment techniques. Psychologist Jack Kornfield (*see also* Preface), recounts how meditation students can easily become overwhelmed by long-suppressed emotions. While some instructors might tell students to just release the *makyo* and other troubling visions and emotions experienced in meditation, Kornfield, in his embrace of embodied enlightenment, explores those troubling experiences with his students as elements of their *dharma* path. Interestingly, some of Kornfield's mind-body approaches with students (again, *see* Preface example), focusing on a mindful awareness of what's going on with them environmentally in the present moment, bears resemblance to gestalt therapy techniques. Lastly, I have included a description from the Diagnostic Standards Manual [DSM-IV-TR] (American Psychiatric Association 2000), pertaining to religious or spiritual experience. It is through this comingling of psychological views on meditation that I see several common threads tying together the obstructions encountered in meditation that I believe are evidence of a kind of *Chan sickness.*

Tsering

Geshe Tashi Tsering describes in *Buddhist Psychology* that the traditional Buddhist understanding of the mind is incredibly profound.

> In many ways the Western mind sciences are only starting to move toward what has been standard

> monastery textbook material for centuries. . . . The Buddhist teachings are intended to bring about a state of happiness and an end to suffering. (Tsering 2006, xiii)
> ….
> [E]verything the Buddha taught, and hence everything within the Buddhist canon, is meant to help us relieve suffering and achieve happiness, and that only happens through the mind. Medicine can cure the body, but that in itself cannot make us happy. According to Buddhism, even physical health is linked to mental states. Thus the real threats to our well-being are attachment, anger, and ignorance [elsewhere, 'greed, hate & delusion']—the three fundamental deluded minds that lead to all other afflictions, both mental and physical. Only with thorough understanding of the mind and its functions can we hope to transcend the disturbing thoughts and emotions that plague us. (Tsering 2006, 1)

Tsering discusses the gradual path to enlightenment, and the need for engaging with the elements of the path in stable and deep meditation.

> The direct perception of emptiness starts at the path of seeing, the third of the five paths of a bodhisattva. This is a very subtle mind, and there is a risk, especially in the advanced stages of meditation, that we will be led into a blissful equanimity from which we will not want to emerge. It is said in some Mahayana sutras that when many individual-liberation practitioners get to a certain point, the wisdom realizing emptiness becomes a meditative absorption that can keep them in blissful stasis for many eons. Our goal is full enlightenment for the benefit of all beings, and if we keep this in mind then we will not get waylaid along the path. It is difficult to develop this mind while we are still trying to deal with the gross mental afflictions that plague our daily lives. The layers of the mind must be systematically unpeeled to expose evermore subtle layers of affliction. Happiness—of ourselves and others—depends on reaching these deeper levels of mind and developing both wisdom and method in our practice. And in order to bring this

> about, we must cultivate a deep understanding of the mind and how it functions. (Tsering 2006, 135)

The systematic Buddhist psychology training, such as the *Abhidharma*, is taught to monks in monastic training in the East. For Western students, it is often difficult to apply the Eastern cultural values enmeshed in the Buddhist psychology system, especially if they have not been raised with those same values. A number of Western psychologists and psychiatrists who use and embrace Buddhist meditation techniques and insights in their practice have written about the need to combine Western psychology in the handling of problems like *Chan sickness.*

Aronson

Psychotherapist Harvey Aronson details his own initial meditative experiences, detailing how his initial expectations were that meditation could solve all his "issues."

> I now understand that when I began traditional Buddhist meditation, I was expecting too much. I believed it would allow me not only to develop spiritually but also to transcend my emotional and psychological problems. This hope is not uncommon among individuals initially hearing of the potential benefits of meditation. I have now arrived at a both/and approach: Traditional meditation is beneficial, *and* it may not solve one's psychological issues. Psychotherapy is helpful, *and* it does not necessarily address spiritual concerns. For a balanced psychological and spiritual life, we in the West can benefit from both meditation and psychological assistance. One approach does not preclude the other. At their best, they can mutually inform and enrich each other. In the end, there are also some differences between the traditional and modern visions, and these can be respectfully acknowledged. (Aronson 2004, 9)

> In the 1970s and 1980s, when I recalled the literature that equated meditation with therapy and considered my own psychological turmoil amid the practice of meditation, I had to ask, Was I missing something? But I knew I was not alone. During retreats or afterward, friends and acquaintances would be beset by emotional suffering that was not effectively addressed by the way they were meditating nor by their teachers. As a translator, I was sometimes party to miscommunications between students and teachers on matters ranging from relationship difficulties to altered states of consciousness. In the most troubling instances, people were finding no resolution of deeply disturbing states through either their practice or contact with their teachers. In a variety of ways, this was due to the assimilation of new concepts into old patterns: Individuals with difficulty making commitments found it hard to set aside time for practice; those with an inclination to self-recrimination blamed themselves for not practicing; and some who experienced psychotic episodes had painful visions related to their exposure to Buddhism. My observations have been echoed more recently by psychiatrist Mark Epstein and psychologist Jeffrey Rubin. Both authors in their reflections on psychotherapy and Buddhist mindfulness mention cases of long-term meditators who were suffering emotionally while maintaining a meditation practice. I agree with their opinions that mindfulness practice done in conjunction with therapy can contribute much to the psychotherapeutic endeavor. (Aronson 2004, 55)

Aronson goes on to posit that it is largely our own cultural and psychological circumstances that go beyond what Buddhist practice can offer us spiritually, and that those factors require other avenues of care.

Epstein

Psychiatrist Mark Epstein writes about the relationship between Buddhist meditation and psychology. Even in 1981, Epstein and Lieff described some of

the difficulties that meditators encounter in an article entitled, “Psychiatric Complications of Meditation Practice.” They note that:

> Early meditation experiences may also fuel 'immature' defense mechanisms of schizoid fantasy and hypochondriasis in that issues of interpersonal relationships are directed back into the internal meditative experience. Others may uncover unresolved psychic conflicts or unexplored drives and have no means of working toward a resolution or greater understanding of such material – meditators are instructed to focus on 'process' rather than content in the effort to develop attentional capacities. Thus, some will uncover psychological issues and not have a framework in which to work out this material. This lack of appropriate outlet for the resolution of such issues leads to what the meditative traditions recognize as the major side effect of this stage of practice: an excessive fascination with and rumination over such internal experience. (Epstein and Lieff 1981)

Epstein details specifics of access concentration and the risks of straining to achieve this meditative state:

> When the stage of access concentration is reached, a different perspective is gained with regard to the meditative experience. Relief from incessant immersion in the mind's flow is momentarily obtained, with the perceptual power of concentration strengthened to allow the relaxing experience of 'no-thought' or of the ground out of which mental events emerge. By nature a transitory experience, this first strengthening of concentration may become the object of meditative ambition. From the point of view of the meditative traditions, straining too tightly to achieve this state can cause a paradoxical increase in anxiety and mental agitation, associated with such physical symptoms as upper back and neck pain. In Tibetan medical theory, this disorder, specifically defined as an obsessive-compulsive-like complication of meditation, is known as a disorder of *sok-rlung* (pron: so-loong) or of the 'life-bearing wind that supports the mind.' “Contemplating . . . too

> strenuously" is seen as a precipitating factor in 'Zen illness' and has also been linked to "counterproductive reactions" such as agitation in other forms of meditation. The paradoxical anxiety reported in TM practitioners may also be a symptom of this phenomenon. From the point of view of ego psychology, the temporary interruption of instinctual drives may fuel escapist tendencies of narcissistic tranquility or of dissociation from inner anxiety provoking stimuli. (Epstein and Lieff 1981, inner citations omitted)

Epstein, in a more recent work, addresses the statement made by psychologist Jack Engler that "You have to be somebody before you can be nobody."

> Engler was responding to a disturbing trend noted by him and others: Western students of Eastern spiritual traditions who jumped into intensive meditation with little preparation sometimes experienced emotional distress. Many sincere practitioners, disillusioned with therapy or with the idea of therapy, turned to meditation in the hope of healing psychological issues and found that emotional material was uncovered that neither they nor their meditation teachers were prepared to deal with. Engler correctly noted the prevalence of borderline and narcissistic pathology in many of those drawn to meditation and proposed that psychotherapy was a better course of treatment for those having trouble maintaining a cohesive sense of self. Not only were analytically trained therapists better versed in the kinds of pathology such people suffered from, they were also trained in therapeutic techniques, knew how to handle transference issues, and were committed to the long-term one-on-one explorations helpful for such conditions. Buddhist teachers, on the other hand, whether of Eastern or Western backgrounds, were most often untrained in therapy, unprepared for the kinds of extreme distress that could emerge in Western practitioners, and uninterested in maintaining long-term personal relationships with students who might attend a workshop or retreat. Engler sought to remedy this very real problem by proposing that meditation was

> a kind of meta-therapy, appropriate for those who had already worked through the developmental tasks of selfhood, but inappropriate for those who had not yet done their psychological homework. (Epstein 2007, 13-14)

In *Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart,* Epstein provides extraordinary insight into mindfulness practices.

> Mindfulness of feelings, which involves meditation on the pleasant and unpleasant aspects of bodily experience, is the next foundation of mindfulness. Since feeling states are experienced primarily in the body, the ability to maintain a continuous state of physical awareness gives an enormous boost to the capacity to bear feelings. This is fortunate because one of the most common occurrences in beginning meditation involves the reexperiencing of terrifying feelings. These are the core states that were often impossible to process in childhood because of parental absence or interference. Even in meditation, these feelings can still seem intolerable, but the entire thrust of meditation practice is designed to increase their tolerability. This can be a frightening experience, as many of my patients have discovered. (Epstein 1999, 108)

In further describing access concentration and mindfulness practice, a stage in the traditionally outlined meditative path, Epstein provides a helpful diagram of the experience of terror during meditation:

> The experiences of terror, on the other hand, derive from the investigating aspects of the mindfulness practice and from the insights that precipitate out of such practice. They are characterized by clear perception of the impermanent, insubstantial and unsatisfying nature of the self and the field of experience. These experiences are profoundly disturbing; they evoke discomfort, fear and anxiety, require the meditator to relinquish fundamental beliefs and identifications, and tend to be fragmenting and anxiogenic. They can only be withstood and tolerated if the counterbalancing forces of concentration are sufficiently strong.

> These are the experiences that Western psychologists fear will unbalance those with inadequate personality structures; yet from the Buddhist perspective equilibrium is maintained by the stabilizing effects of concentration. That such concentration might also solidify ego development could be explained by the identification of concentration with gratification of the ego ideal. (Epstein 2007, 29)

Epstein details the potential pitfalls of meditation for several personality types, including the borderline personality, the narcissistic personality, the schizoid personality, and the depressive personality.

> Those personality types prone to pathological emptiness who begin Buddhist meditation practices designed to uncover Buddhist emptiness face several potential pitfalls.
>
> In the **borderline personality,** for instance, what is most lacking is the synthetic or integrative capacity of the ego to consolidate and maintain multiple, conflicting self/object representations. The relationship of the self with internalized object relationships is distorted by the defense of splitting, in which all good and all bad representations of the same person cannot be integrated. Similarly, splitting can persist between the grandiose, idealized self/object and the "deflated, debased" self/object and the ideal ego may remain fused with primitive all-good object representations, rather than separating off into the superego. The mindfulness practices actually strengthen the synthetic capacities of the ego by training the observing ego to attend to whatever arises without clinging or condemnation, thus allowing conflicting images to present themselves just as they are. So mindfulness practices can actually be very helpful in decreasing the pathologized emptiness of the borderline personality. *However*, if the insight practices into the emptiness of the ideal ego are attempted prematurely, there are real risks of the loss of the good self-images with which it may be fused, with the preservation and exacerbation of the all-bad, destructive images provoking the borderline's characteristic defensive flight into

depersonalization or identity loss. This would undoubtedly be absolutely terrifying, and this kind of scenario is not uncommon among populations of Western students who undertake intensive practice.

The **narcissistic personality** is a different story. According to Kernberg's (1982) formulation for severe narcissistic disturbances, between the ages of 3 and 5, all of the positive representations of self and objects are put together along with the idealized representations into a structure that he terms the pathological grandiose self. All of the negative aspects are projected onto others and aggression is expressed as devaluation of others. Ideal ego representations are incorporated into this pathological grandiose self, leaving only the “aggressively determined components,” which tend to be dissociated and projected, in the superego. Emptiness in the narcissist is a result of the void that is created in the internal world of object relations through the constant devaluation of others. This is a pervasive feeling that can be temporarily interrupted only by admiration from others, which tends to be all that is sought in intimate relationships. It is extremely difficult for the narcissistic personality to uncover the sense of inherent existence embodied in the ideal ego because of its fusion in the pathological grandiose self. Narcissists are much more likely to subvert the notion of “non-self” or “egolessness,” incorporating that image back into their ideal egos, becoming arrogant about their special understanding and using Buddhist veneration of emptiness as justification for their paucity of meaningful relationships.

The **schizoid personality** tends to feel emptiness as an “innate quality” of their being that makes them different from other people, who they can see have feelings of “love, hatred, tenderness, longing or mourning” that they find unavailable within themselves. The schizoid stance has been seen as a defense against feeling longing for “emotional supplies from a good object” or as the result of “destructive impulses turned from the object towards his own ego.” In either case, these people feel disintegrated, rather than anxious, unable to experience emotion, unable to contact others, and most in touch with a “soothing,”

“amorphous experience of indefiniteness and weakness.” Successful meditation for them involves a gradual process whereby contact is first made with the ego ideal through the concentration practices, providing a sense of ontological security to counter their pervasive insecurity and allowing the soothing emptiness to be gradually relinquished. At this point the mindfulness practices can begin to uncover the emotional traces that have been unattended to. The obvious misuse of meditation here is as a validation and reinforcement of the schizoid view of “no feelings” as an absolute truth. The Zen chant of “no eyes, no ears, no mouth, etc.” can readily serve as a schizoid defense when incorrectly apprehended.

In the **depressive personality,** emptiness functions as a kind of one step beyond loneliness. Not only is the loved object missed and longed for, but there is an internal void and a feeling of an incapacity for love. There may be a deeply felt sense of unworthiness that attributes the loss of the other to the person's own badness; thus depressed persons come to feel that they do not deserve to be loved or appreciated. The therapeutic value of meditation for these people lies in the establishment of contact with a valued internal object through the concentration practices that release feelings of love, joy, contentment, and oneness. This is not a substitute for establishing intimate relationships, but it does reveal to depressed personalities that they are capable of feeling what they thought themselves incapable of.

The major psychological issues for those with conflicts over their idealized self-images is often a kind of shame, or unworthiness, that arises when the discrepancy between actual and idealized self is too great. This unworthiness can block access to good internal self/objects, creating a sense of being “cut off” from love, of incompleteness. Without a working through of this completeness, which can be facilitated both by meditation and by psychotherapy, the pre-existing sense of emptiness may never be fully abandoned. There is a real danger, in these personalities, of never progressing beyond the concentration practices, of resting in a state where the sense of unworthiness is being off-set but where the fundamental misconceptions of an

> inherent self are not examined.
>
> This is also the fundamental danger for the rest of us in progressing on the path of meditation. We are all prone to ignore the falsely conceived self by dwelling in the tranquil stabilization that meditation practice offers. These states, which can become ineffably sublime, offer experiences of oneness far removed from our usual personalities that can be mistaken for emptiness by an untrained practitioner. Yet the ultimate purpose of Buddhist meditation is not to withdraw from the falsely conceived self but to *recognize* the misconception, thereby weakening its influence. "Without disbelieving the object of this (misconception)," said Dharmakirti, "it is impossible to abandon (misconceiving it)." There is a deep, tenacious resistance to this disbelief, a kind of clutching that occurs, a fear of an emptiness that is conceived to be as real as the inherently existent I. In the words of Huang Po, "Men are afraid to forget their minds, fearing to fall through the Void with nothing to stay their fall. They do not know that the Void is not really void, but the realm of the real *Dharma*." (Epstein 2007, 65-8, emphasis added; inner citations omitted)

Epstein's intimate understanding of how mental states can affect the meditation experience, as well as what particular forms of meditation can be beneficial to those with specific mental conditions, suggests that there is ample guidance for psychologists and others using Buddhist meditation practices in conjunction with therapy. It also suggests that Zen masters and meditation teachers should probably be grounded in some familiarity with the possibilities that may come to the *zendo* for training.

Brazier

Psychotherapist David Brazier describes a state called 'body and mind dropping away' in *Zen Therapy: Transcending the Sorrows of the Human Mind:*

> When one sits, as a beginner, even for fifteen or twenty minutes, one is liable to find that there are all manner of discomforts which distract. This is in addition to the fact that the mind seems unable to stay concentrated upon one thing. When we stay still and alert, the compulsive, conditioned mind reacts. It tries its very best to regain control, but the meditator just sits still and watches. The more our life is subject to compulsiveness, the more difficult we find it to do this exercise.
>
> Compulsiveness may be extrovert or introvert. If it takes the form of activities and addictions, then the struggle we will have with *zazen* is likely to be physical: the sheer effort to stay still will combat our habit. If, on the other hand, we are the kind of person who becomes lost in reveries, it will be the control of the mind which will challenge us most. In this latter case, however, a great deal can be achieved by paying particularly detailed attention to posture. Body and mind are a unity and when the mind wanders, the body loses tone.
>
> Concentration can be aided by counting breaths. Alternatively, one can say to oneself, 'Now I breathe in, now I breathe out,' or just 'In . . . Out . . .' This improves concentration and gets us used to the interplay between body and mind. Soon, one dispenses with actual counting and simply keeps the breath in mind, observing the quality of each breath, long, short, rough, smooth, fast, slow, warm, cold and so on. The aim is to avoid intellection on the one hand and mind wandering on the other. Simply be there, observing. Stay in the here and now. Central attention is on the breath. Peripheral attention notices whatever else occurs, passing car noise, bird-song, etc., while holding to the utmost stillness of body and mind. (Brazier 1995, 56)

Brazier's explanation of the effects of compulsiveness are fascinating, particularly with combating physical habits and controlling the wandering mind. His reminder to remedy this struggle with attention to posture is at the very core of *zazen*.

Brazier also addresses the subject of Mara's appearance when the practitioner attempts to break his/her conditioning:

> When the spiritual practitioner decides to fast, they do so, not to lose weight, but to bring the kleshas out into the open where they can be seen and dealt with. The quickest way to bring Mara's hosts to battle is to give something up. If we are conditioned to surrender as soon as Mara appears, however, our diet will not get very far. If we confront Mara joyfully, he is soon transformed into a rain of flowers (or angels). To use this principle it is not necessary to believe in Mara or the devil as metaphysical beings. We are not talking here about ghosts and goblins. We are creating a picture of what happens in everybody's mind when they decide to make some changes. (Brazier 1995, 126)

Here again, Brazier underscores a key point in Chan and Zen practice: the need to confront the demons that challenge one's efforts to bring about and embrace positive changes, in the pursuit of self-cultivation.

Owens

Claire Myers Owens writes about Zen meditation in terms of the classes and levels of consciousness experienced therein. Her description of the *makyo* she experienced during her meditative states is fascinating, especially in her descriptions of historic and symbolic imagery. She enumerates the eight classes of consciousness that are delineated in Buddhism, the first six of which are the senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and thought (intellect). *Manas*, or mind, is the seventh class, and it has two components: lower (sense) and higher (intuition). The *manas* conveys sensory experience to the eight level. Universal consciousness (*alayavijnana*) is the eight class. The first six classes are the purview of the conscious mind, examine the relationship between subject and

object, and are connected to birth and death. The seventh and eighth classes comprise the conscious and unconscious mind. By the time the eighth state is reached, bodily birth and death cease to exist. When it comes to *zazen* and *satori*, these are considered psychological and spiritual processes that take place in different levels of the unconscious. Owens notes that Yasutani discusses the subconscious/unconscious into distinct levels of experience: *makyo* and enlightenment. *Makyo* are the images, including fantasies, visions, monsters, etc., that one might perceive while sitting *zazen*.

> Based on empirical evidence, both the observed and the experiential, the suggestion is offered here that *makyo* appears to embrace the first three levels of the unconscious, and enlightenment occurs in the fourth and deepest level; the four levels of the unconscious in Zen might be termed: (1) imagery; (2) neurosis (if any); (3) historical and symbolical imagery; (4) self-realization that in rare instances rises to nirvana. (Owens 1992, 170)

Owens asserts that traversing the minefields of the three unconscious levels where *makyo* can appear is a necessary step to reaching the fourth level, where enlightenment may sometimes be found. In a description of a particular three-day *sesshin* (intensive Zen training), Owens elucidates a range of images that she experienced from the first level of the unconscious during a meditation period of twelve consecutive hours. She discusses how the blank wall in front of her in the meditation hall was like a movie theatre screen with projected moving images from her mind, filling her entire field of vision.

> Paraded before me were images of pink satin damask, figured green wallpaper, castles, gold statues of Buddha, a bust of Buddha with the face of my teacher, Mary holding the infant Jesus, a stage with actors, a green jungle with playful monkeys—

> all with a small bright spotlight playing across them. A very large disconcerting white enamel fern leaf glittering like silver was encrusted with amethysts. A detached arm and hand gestured wildly, turned black, every finger suddenly outlined with golden light. These images undulated ceaselessly—maddeningly. I also beheld a small mythical golden dragon that completely mystified me at the moment, as it was not something once seen and remembered. Later I learned its meaning in Houston and Masters.
>
> This surrender of the rational mind and opening of the door into the transrational is a deep, nerve-shaking experience. It shook my body uncontrollably and caused deep painful sobbing—hour after hour. Its effect was exhausting yet exhilarating. (Owens 1992, 171)

Owens' account of the intense physical spasms coupled with sobbing for extended periods attests to the palpable effects that can be experienced as a result of prolonged meditation. Many casual meditators—myself included—would probably be meditating for short enough periods (20-40 minutes max.) that they would fail to reach this state.

Owens explains how neuroses can affect meditation. She describes how the "unloved generation" of young people in America can populate a Zen center and experience *makyo* during meditation that may include bad childhood memories and neuroses. She cites to Yasutani's warning to new meditators not to cling to visions, fantasies, prophecies or terrible images that might spring up from the unconscious mind. Dwelling on such *makyo* would frustrate one's Zen practice. With the right approach, *zazen* can help the practitioner alleviate some neurotic problem issues, allowing him or her to relive some painful childhood problems and possibly even to analyze them and resolve them. An especially difficult neurosis may require psychiatric treatment. Owens reminds us that Jung

observed that “all religions are a form of therapy.” She adds that in the West, the Zen spiritual teacher may have occasion to recommend a competent psychiatrist, and if possible, one who is open to religious beliefs and practices. Owens describes Freud's impact on the interrelationship between psychology and religion, especially in terms of the interplay between neurosis and the personal unconscious or the second level of the unconscious. She reminds us that shortly before his death, Freud wrote about neurosis in terms of its origins in repressed sexuality in childhood or infancy: “The symptoms of neuroses are exclusively . . . either a substitutive satisfaction of some sexual impulse or measures to prevent such satisfaction.” Owens describes the process of patients in psychotherapy remembering and reliving such repressed memories of childhood or infancy as they related to their parents or siblings. She draws the analogy between Freud's interpreting dreams to reveal the contents of a patient's unconscious and the exploration of *makyo,* which may be thought to arise from the second or neurotic level during *zazen*. Interestingly, Owens cites to a follower of Freud's, Dr. Flanders Dunbar, in suggesting that many patients presenting with neuroses were rejected by their parents during childhood, often spawning psychosomatic ills including allergies, hay fever, asthma and eczema. “Sometimes the skin will literally 'weep' instead of the eyes. Death, divorce, or quarreling of parents often produces neurotic children.” (Owens 1992, 171-173)

Owens recounts from personal experience the historic imagery that can arise during meditation, explaining visions she experienced during the third level of consciousness.

> At that time I beheld projected images of Egyptians and Jews of Biblical times in their striped costumes walking endlessly around a well and gazing at me expectantly with great intensity. But it was nearly five o'clock. The bell soon rang for supper, interrupting this scene at the well which I was unable to interpret.
>
> In *zazen* it is usually when the third level is liberated that supernormal psychic powers may sometimes manifest themselves. Zen in general and Roshi Kapleau in particular discourage the cultivation of such powers until after one is fully enlightened and a proper judge of the appropriate way to use powers for the benefit of others. They are considered an obstacle in the path toward self-realization, partly because they may inflate the aspirant's self-esteem. Ego is the enemy. (Owens 1992, 173)

Owens notes that Kapleau and others caution practitioners about the risks of cultivating supernormal psychic powers via meditation. Indeed, if one pursues a rigorous *zazen* schedule in the hopes of obtaining such special abilities, one may strain past the point of one's limits, thereby causing imbalance and frustration. She describes different *makyo* that the Buddha warned against and that Yasutani enumerates in the progression from the sixth through the eighth class of consciousness. Some students report the ability to see through solid objects; others report traces of past experiences appearing sporadically in the seventh and eighth classes of consciousness, lending a feeling of expanded reality. Yasutani notes that these kinds of visions are indicators that one is at a critical point in *zazen*, and that with an exertion of effort, one can experience a *kensho*, or mild enlightenment experience. Historically, in documents such as the *Visuddhimagga*, meditators have described miraculous psychic abilities including clairvoyance and telepathy. Goleman cautions that Western science is presently unable to explain

such states. But the Zen student who experiences them finds them inspirational, thereby motivating him or her to keep exploring the powers made possible by *zazen* (Owens 1992, 173-174).

In a chilling, first-person account of a *Chan sickness* experience, Owens details her visions experienced during a seven-day *sesshin* in which she had been questioning her ability to assimilate to the rules of Zen practice, after rebelling against strict rules in her daily life.

> Despite such intellectual rebellion, however, I continued to sit, and finally was able to concentrate. As I stared at the blank surface of the low divider wall in front of me I suddenly beheld a row of people—my mother (dead), my brother, and a young woman, my friendly enemy. They were all gazing at me with sad accusing eyes. I knew I had hurt them in real life in various ways, though not always intentionally. Suddenly such powerful repentance and desire to expiate seized me that my very body shook uncontrollably. Sobs tore up from the depths of my being. It was like tearing up the roots of my ego, annihilating lifelong delusions of my own goodness. This emotional storm continued hour after hour. I was oblivious, blind, to everything and everybody in the *zendo*.
>
> After five hours two monitors came and lifted me up. My body was so heavy and my legs so weak I was unable to walk. They carried me upstairs and placed me on the bed. After an hour's rest I returned to the *zendo* and commenced concentration with renewed assurance. As I gazed at the low wooden dividing wall in front of me it seemed to abruptly turn a beautiful luminous blue with lights flickering at the lower edge. Then it changed to thick silvery ice, next to gauze. Then I saw right through the wall and beheld two men sitting on the other side. I was incredulous even while this phenomenon was occurring. When it happened again the next day I accepted it as *makyo*, a psychic power, encouraging, but not worth clinging to.

> The experience itself was so convincing I needed no rational verification. Furthermore, no trainee during a tense solemn religious session like a *sesshin* would dream of disrupting her own practice or that of the fifty other aspirants in the *zendo*. She would be severely reprimanded, if not thrown out of the *sangha*. (Owens 1992, 174-175, inner citations omitted)

Owens provides a description of the self-realization or fourth level of consciousness experienced in meditation, which is said to induce the feeling of religious experience, a merging with Pure Consciousness. She illustrates that point with a description of Philip Kapleau's realization during a *dokusan* (private interview with the Master).

> All at once the roshi, the room . . . disappeared in a dazzling stream of illumination and I felt myself bathed in a delicious unspeakable delight. . . . For a fleeting eternity I was alone—I alone was . . . Then the roshi swam into view. Our eyes met and we burst out laughing. . .
>
> I exclaimed more to myself than to the roshi, "I have it! I know! There is nothing, absolutely nothing. I am everything and everything is nothing."
>
> Later Zen Master Yasutani told Kapleau, "It is your duty to carry Zen to the West." (Owens 1992, 175, inner citation omitted)

Owens notes that there are many instances of the enlightenment event throughout Japanese, Chinese and Sanskrit versions of Buddhist literature. She adds that the four levels of the unconscious that are crossed through in *zazen* and *satori*, tend to involve meaningless imagery, neuroses, historic or symbolic events or persons, and self-realization.

In summarizing the dangers that may be experienced along the Path, Owens provides a helpful list:

> If one has reached a shallow enlightenment one may display pride in one's accomplishment. This is called the *"Zen sickness."* Also the deep, emotionally disturbing problems aroused by *zazen* may at times seen unbearable. Some trainees may faint, sob, shout, or occasionally become hysterical. Breaking the barrier erected by the strong egocentric rational mind and liberating the virtues imprisoned in the deepest levels of the unconscious, by one's own strenuous efforts is a painful, powerful, wonderful operation. If persisted in religiously, however, it is rewarding beyond the credence of the inexperienced. (Owens 1992, 201)

To Owens, then, the strenuous efforts expended in an intensified *zazen* practice are rewarded by amazing results, even if one must undergo some difficult transformations, including *Zen sickness.*

Goleman

Daniel Goleman provides a wealth of detail in his examination of meditation and states of consciousness. In describing the path of insight, he illustrates ten signs of pseudonirvana, also called "Knowledge of Arising and Passing Away." The ten signs are: (1) brilliant light; (2) rapturous feelings; (3) tranquility; (4) devotion; (5) energy; (6) happiness; (7) strong mindfulness; (8) equanimity toward objects of contemplation; (9) attachment to these newly arisen states; and (10) quick and clear perception. According to Goleman, the meditator needs to realize, either on his own or with the guidance of his/her teacher, that these experiences are signs to be observed along the way, rather than a final destination. Knowing this, the meditator can use these signs as a springboard to move forward, rather than being satisfied with them or attached to them (Goleman 1992, 222).

Following these pseudonirvana experiences, Goleman accentuates that perception and discrimination of phenomena increases in clarity and speed. At a certain point, perception of objects becomes so fast that their vanishing is perceived more clearly than their arising. This continues to the point that upon the moment of contemplation, the mind and its object both vanish in pairs at every moment. The meditator experiences reality as being in a constant state of dissolving.

> A series of realizations flows from this experience. *The mind becomes gripped with fear and dread; all mental formations are seen to be dreadful in nature.* Becoming—that is, the coming into being of thoughts—is regarded as a state of terror. The occurrence of mental phenomena—ordinarily reckoned a source of pleasure—is seen only as a state of being continuously oppressed, which mind is helpless to avoid. (Goleman 1992, 224, emphasis added)

Goleman continues that the meditator becomes aware of only the faults and unsatisfactoriness of all phenomena. They become signs of danger. He or she begins to experience a feeling that there is nothing to place hopes in or hold on to. Suffering and misery become pervasive. Then the meditator, experiencing all phenomena in terms of misery, becomes disgusted with them. Even objects that were once enjoyable become unattractive and boring and the meditator becomes dispassionate.

> Between the moments of noticing, the thought will arise that only in the ceasing of all mental formations is there relief. Now mind no longer fastens on to formations; the meditator becomes desirous of escape from suffering on account of these phenomena. *Painful feelings may arise throughout his body, and he may be unwilling to*

> *remain long in one posture.* The comfortless nature of mind-stuff becomes more evident than ever; motivation for deliverance from it emerges at the root of his being. With this strong motivation for surcease from mental formations, the meditator intensifies his efforts of noticing these formations for the very purpose of escaping them. Then the nature of these phenomena—their impermanence, the element of suffering, and their voidness of self—will become clearly evident. *Also at this stage the meditator's body will usually undergo severe, sharp pains of growing intensity. His whole body and mind will seem a mass of suffering; restlessness may overwhelm his application to insight.* But by applying the practice of noticing to these pains, they will come to cease. At this point noticing becomes strong and lucid. At every moment he knows quite clearly the three characteristics of these phenomena, and one of the three will come to dominate his understanding. (Goleman 1992, 225, emphasis added)

But all is not lost. Goleman describes that at this point, contemplation proceeds easily and smoothly. The feelings of despair experienced along the way cease, and bodily pains are gone. The extremes of dread and delight in mental objects have been left behind. The meditator begins to experience a sublime clarity and an equanimity toward all mental formations. Meditation at this point becomes effortless at this stage, and noticing occurs steadily uninterrupted and with no fatigue. Contemplation gains speed and insight becomes highly active.

> Insight is now on the verge of its culmination; noticing is keen, strong, and lucid. All mental formations are instantly known to be impermanent, painful, or without self simply because one sees their dissolution. All formations are seen either as limited and circumscribed or as devoid of desirability, or as alien. Detachment from them is at peak. Noticing no longer enters into or settles down on any formations at all. Then consciousness arises that takes as its object the "signless, no-occurrence,

> no-formation": nirvana. Physical and mental phenomena cease entirely. This moment of realization of nirvana does not, in its first attainment, last even for a second. Immediately following, mind reflects on the experience of nirvana just past. (Goleman 1992, 225)

In Goleman's description, fear and dread, realization of faults and unsatisfactoriness, overwhelming painful feelings must be noticed and squelched by mindfulness. Only then can the practitioner proceed to clarity and insight. Fortunately, however, the student is not necessarily alone on this journey. Goleman provides excellent advice on the importance of finding an experienced teacher to help guide you through the right path.

> The ideal meditation teacher was the Buddha, who, it is said, had developed the power to know the mind and heart of others, and so could match perfectly each person with the appropriate subject for concentration. In lieu of the Buddha, the *Visuddhimagga* advises the would-be meditator to seek out a teacher according to the level of attainment in meditation, the most highly accomplished being the best teacher. His support and advice are critical in making one's way through unfamiliar mental terrain. The pupil "takes refuge" in his teacher, and must enter a contract of surrender to him. What is surrendered is the propensities of ego—"hindrances" which might prevent the student from purposefully pursuing meditation to the point where those ego propensities are transcended. But the responsibility for salvation is laid squarely on the student's shoulders, not on the teacher's; the teacher is not a traditional Eastern guru, but a "good friend" on the path. The teacher will point the way; the student must walk for himself. The essence of the role of teacher in this tradition is given in the lines from the Zenrin:
>
> *If you wish to know the road up the mountain,*
> *You must ask the man who goes back and forth in it.*
>
> (Goleman 1992, 213, inner citations omitted)

Similar to Owens' and Goleman's descriptions of the painful or fearful states that can be experienced during specific stages of meditation, Yasuo Yuasa details the physiological effects of meditation, both for Zen and Yoga practitioners, emphasizing how they begin with training respiration. He discusses *pratyahara* and how it is a stage of the breathing method that assists the practitioner in controlling sensations.

> The sixth through the eighth stages, the deepening of meditation, are descriptive of the states of consciousness from the inner side of experience. These terms are widely used also in Buddhism. *Dharana* is translated as *soji* (holding fast) in Japanese Buddhism, and it means the mental concentration on one object through a conscious effort. Its object may be, for example, a part of one's body (the space between the eyebrows, the tip of the nose, or the lower abdomen) or it can be a conceptual object (a buddha, a bodhisattva, or the notion of emptiness). Mandalas and pictures depicting a Buddha's descent, for example, were originally meditative tools in the tantric Buddhist practices of the Heian period.
>
> From the depth-psychological view, it is interesting that when a person enters this state, a phenomenon analogous to psychosomatic disease occurs. As noted earlier, a patient with a neurosis becomes psychologically isolated from the outside world, falling into a state that Jung calls compensatory animation. The emotional energy, denied any contact with the external world, is blocked, producing a compensatory image. Meditation guides one into a state of psychological isolation by voluntarily arresting the activity of the sensory-motor circuit. Consequently, the emotional energy issuing from the unconscious loses its means of dissipation, gets blocked up, and produces compensatory images. At the initial state of meditation, a cultivator often experiences emotional instability, physical abnormalities, and hallucinations. Those who take these images naively are prone to think of them as having some

> religious significance, but they are really more like the states induced by drugs like LSD. In Yoga handbooks, there are descriptions of what kinds of hallucinatory experiences may occur. The Tendai Buddhist meditation tradition, *shikan*, calls this the state of "*majkyo*" (the demonic realm) and it warns us not to confuse it with a true satori. The Zen-sickness discussed by Zen Buddhism is probably also the same. To use an analogy, meditation is immunization therapy: one elevates the soul to a higher state by producing voluntarily a stage of slight sickness. (Yuasa 1987, 214-215)

For Yuasa, then, the sickness is a rite of passage to get to satori. The "emotional instability, physical abnormalities, and hallucinations" compose the moat that one must swim to get to the castle.

Kornfield

Jack Kornfield (*see* Preface), a well-known and highly respected psychotherapist and teacher at Spirit Rock in Marin County, California, has written a number of bestselling books on psychology and Buddhism. In a profile of Kornfield appearing in *Shambhala Sun,* author Steve Silberman describes Kornfield's influence on Buddhism in the West, including the concept of 'embodied enlightenment.' Interestingly, Silberman includes a quote from Kornfield on *makyo*:

> By embracing innovative approaches to teaching, community building, and practice, the center has become an R&D lab for the future of American Buddhism. One of the major contributions that Spirit Rock has made to the *dharma* is the concept of embodied enlightenment, a path of practice firmly grounded in day-to-day experience and informed by Western psychology. The impetus behind this approach, Kornfield says, was the need to address a problem for Buddhists that John Welwood calls "spiritual bypass." Instead of dealing with family wounds and other deep-seated

> emotional issues, some meditators try to route around them by forcing themselves to practice harder. It doesn't work. As the surface chatter of their minds becomes quiet, they can become overwhelmed by long-suppressed emotions.
>
> Kornfield found that some of the same methods of working with feelings that aided his clients in psychotherapy could help his students go deeper in their practice. “The standard instruction in most Buddhist traditions would be that this is all *makyo*, illusion. Just be mindful of it, name it as emotion, and let it go,” he says. “But as we became more and more skilled, we realized that the personal and universal couldn't be separated, and that what people were experiencing—including all of their trauma, history, and longings—was in fact the place of their *dharma*.”
>
> Now, many of the senior teachers at Spirit Rock are also psychotherapists. More than most practice places, the center embraces other ways of understanding the mind as adjuncts to meditation, including Advaita Vedanta, the Enneagram (Kornfield considers himself a Three, “the performer”), and A.H. Almaas' Diamond Approach. Classes and retreats also incorporate ways of listening closely to the body, supplementing mindful sitting and walking with yoga and qigong.
>
> Although merging Buddhism, psychotherapy, and bodywork may seem like the ultimate in fuzzy California spirituality—and has been ridiculed as “Boomer Buddhism” by critics such as religion professor and author Stephen Prothero—Sharon Salzberg points out that Kornfield's inclusive conception of the *dharma* is an extension of the training he received from Ajahn Chah in Thailand. “The monastic path is so holistic. It's about your relationship to your teacher and your community, and how you sweep a path, as well as your experiences on a cushion,” she says. “It's about living a life, not just pursuing a method. I think that really influenced Jack in his interest in psychology.” (Silberman 2010, 89)

Kornfield explains that he often encourages meditation students to employ practices of compassion and equanimity to counter disturbing emotions and

images that can arise during meditation. He also elucidates the value of prescribing the use of ritual to create new possibilities.

> Creating a simple ritual, such as inviting a person to make a prayer or light a candle, can bring a sense of reverence and new possibility to that person's inner work. Sometimes crafting a personalized ritual on the spot is the best medicine. It may be the ceremonial burning of old love letters or the burying of relics of our grief; it may be a paper listing habits and fears to be released upon the waves, the ringing of a gong to symbolize the end of an unhealthy phase of life, or the dedication and lighting of a candle to symbolize a newfound freedom. All these rituals can release our past and reawaken our true nature. (Kornfield 2008, 286)

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

Interestingly, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision* ("DSM-IV-TR"), published by the American Psychiatric Association and a standard reference used by psychologists and psychiatrists in describing patients in terms of their presenting conditions, includes in its classifications under a section titled, "Additional Conditions That May Be A Focus Of Clinical Attention," a code of V62.879: Religious or Spiritual Problem:

> This category can be used when the focus of clinical attention is a religious or spiritual problem. Examples include distressing experiences that involve loss or questioning of faith, problems associated with conversion to a new faith, or questioning of spiritual values that may not necessarily be related to an organized church or religious institution. (APA 2000, 741)

If a meditation student were referred to a psychologist because of extremely troubling mental states or hallucinations brought on by meditation, it is possible

that the V62.879 classification might be applied. Just as likely, perhaps, is that, as Epstein notes, one of the underlying conditions (e.g., borderline personality, narcissistic personality, depressive personality, etc.) might be ascribed to the patient's presentation, or possibly even a combination of something like the religious or spiritual problem category along with the underlying personality category. Psychological professionals typically use a combination of DSM-IV and ICM categorizations in listing the principal diagnosis and underlying conditions, by axis point. It will be fascinating to observe whether future revisions of the DSM might be expanded to include more specific religious or spiritual problems, including *Chan sickness.*

CHAPTER 6

EXPLORATION OF POSSIBLE PARALLELS:
ACEDIA AND DEPRESSION

When we are lost, frightened, or facing something new or unknown, our first impulse is usually to either run or fight. Years of evolution have built that into us. Though at times the moment calls for one of those responses, at other times running from our condition or fighting against it will only increase our pain and our sense of being trapped. Stumbling in fear and panic, we become more lost. In depression we often run until we become swallowed up in the darkness that has become our life. What may be crucial to our healing is, first, to do nothing.

-Philip Martin
"Stopping to Listen"
The Zen Path Through Depression
(Martin 1999, 1)

Possible parallels

There are certain conditions that seemed similar to *Chan sickness* to me. 'Similar' though, means 'not the same.' Acedia, long an occupational hazard for monastics (since the writings of the early desert fathers) sounded like a possible parallel, as did depression. Initially, I had guessed that one possible cause of *Chan sickness* was too much meditation on *sunyata* (emptiness, voidness), such that I conjectured the Chan meditator might begin to view the world as all shades of gray, with the color all sucked out of view. That led me to wonder if *Chan sickness* might be a sort of depression.

Acedia

In *Acedia and Me* (2008), Kathleen Norris explores the roots of acedia, which was originally considered one of the eight deadly sins. Apparently the eighth (acedia) was dropped (with acedia being lumped into sloth), and they became the seven deadly sins that we know today (lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, pride). As Norris describes it, acedia is the absence of care. Known

as the noonday demon, it tended to affect monastics at the noon hour, when the sun was at its highest. In modern terms, Norris likens it to the ease of indifference. For example, given all the violence in the world today, not caring about it all is a kind of coping strategy. She likens acedia to "the flipside of zeal."

John Cassian, one of the desert fathers in the fifth century CE, writes about acedia in one of his major works, *The Institutes.*

> [Acedia] we can refer to as a wearied or anxious heart. It is akin to sadness and is the peculiar lot of solitaries and a particularly dangerous and frequent foe of those dwelling in the desert. It disturbs the monk especially around the sixth hour, rushing in upon him like a kind of fever at just this time and inflicting upon the enfeebled soul the most burning heat of its attacks at regular and set intervals. Some of the elders declare that this is the noonday demon that is mentioned in the ninetieth psalm.
>
> ….
>
> For the person whom it has begun to conquer, to whatever degree, it either allows to stay in his cell without any spiritual progress, in as it were a state of inactivity and surrender, or drives him out from there and makes him, in addition, unstable and feckless. It also causes him to be slothful when it comes to any kind of work and to go around constantly to the cells and monasteries of the brothers with no other reason than somewhere or somehow to discover something to eat. For the mind of the indolent knows how to think of nothing but food and the belly until, having at some time or other made friends with a man or woman equally sluggish and lukewarm, it gets entangled in their affairs and business and gradually finds itself so entrapped in their harmful concerns that it is as it were bound by serpentine coils and from then on can never free itself for the sake of the perfection of its former profession.
>
> ….
>
> [H]e is gradually drawn out of his cell and begins to forget the reason for his profession, which is nothing other than the vision and contemplation

> of that divine purity which is more excellent than anything else and which can be acquired only by silence, by remaining constantly in one's cell, and by meditation. (Cassian 2000, 219-221)

Norris opines that acedia is perhaps a rampant problem in much of today's restlessness, despair and commitment phobia.

> I believe that such standard dictionary definitions of acedia as “apathy,” “boredom,” or “torpor” do not begin to cover it, and while we may find it convenient to regard it as a more primitive word for what we now term depression, the truth is much more complex. Having experienced both conditions, I think it likely that much of the restless boredom, frantic escapism, commitment phobia, and enervating despair that plagues us today is the ancient demon of acedia in modern dress. The boundaries between depression and acedia are notoriously fluid; at the risk of oversimplifying, I would suggest that while depression is an illness treatable by counseling and medication, acedia is a vice that is best countered by spiritual practice and the discipline of prayer.
>
> At its Greek root, the word acedia means the absence of care. The person afflicted by acedia refuses to care or is incapable of doing so. When life becomes too challenging and engagement with others too demanding, acedia offers a kind of spiritual morphine: you know the pain is there, yet can't rouse yourself to give a damn. (Norris 2008, 3)

Evagrius of Ponticus writes in *The Praktikos* (from the fourth century CE) that the demon of acedia is the most troublesome of them all.

> When we meet with the demon of acedia then is the time with tears to divide our soul in two. One part is to encourage; the other is to be encouraged. Thus we are to sow seeds of a firm hope in ourselves while we sing with the holy David: “Why are you filled with sadness, my soul? Why are you distraught? Trust in God, for I shall give praise to him. He it is who saves me, the light of my eyes and my God.”
>
> The time of temptation is not the time to

> leave one's cell, devising plausible pretexts. Rather, stand there firmly and be patient. Bravely take all that the demon brings upon you, but above all face up to the demon of acedia who is the most grievous of all and who on this account will effect the greatest purification of soul. Indeed to flee and to shun such conflicts schools the spirit in awkwardness, cowardice and fear.
>
> Our holy and most ascetic master stated that the monk should always live as if he were to die on the morrow but at the same time that he should treat his body as if he were to live on with it for many years to come. For, he said, by the first attitude he will be able to cut off every thought that comes from acedia and thus become more fervent in his monastic practices, by the second device he will preserve his body in good health and maintain its continence intact. (Bamberger 1981, 23-24)

Norris interviews monastics to discover whether acedia is pervasive. The monastics that she quotes indicate that acedia is practically a rite of passage.

> I find it revealing that acedia is still a given of monastic life, whereas depression is not. As one Benedictine sister puts it, acedia is to monastics what acne is to adolescents: unfair, inopportune, and inevitable. Also, as one monk comments, it can leave permanent scars. Monastic people compare the onset of acedia to a marathoner's "hitting the wall." Like a runner, the monk can rely on endurance to some extent, but it will not take him all the way. An abbot has commented that it's an awful change to witness in a person, once the initial enthusiasm of a monastic vocation wears off, or more accurately, drops off. "People really go off a cliff, and their despair is expressed as, 'I'm a fraud, you're all frauds, and I have to get out of here.'" (Norris 2008, 143)
>
> For contemporary monks suffering from acedia, the cure is much the same as in the fourth-century desert. When a monk says, "I can't bear to live this way for the next forty years of my life," the answer is still that he need be concerned only with today. "I recommend physical labor," one abbot has said, "woodworking, gardening, even mopping the halls,

> anything to get them out of that closed circle of the self. Sometimes it helps them to know that we've all be through this.” (Norris 2008, 145)

The abbot's prescription of physical labor reminds me of Suzuki's observations of life in the *zendo*, including alternating periods of meditation with physical labor such as gardening or walking meditation.

Rowan Williams gives a nice summary of the efforts of the early Christian desert fathers to combat demons such as acedia:

> The silence, fasting, and vigils, the struggle with one's inner demons, the celibacy and solitude of the desert, were all embraced as difficult but positive means of realizing the monastic goal. Extremism was rejected because it failed to achieve it. Pride in ascetical success was seen as a greater danger than failure, which could be more easily transcended by confession, humility, and forgiveness. A feeling of the spirit on Scripture was not a biblical fundamentalism but an encounter with the spiritual power of the sacred texts and an interiorization of their meaning at the deepest level of perception. The life of the desert was not a platonic abstraction. The body was disciplined, not hated. Monks were not expected to be businessmen, but they were not beggars either and were meant to earn their daily bread by simple work like weaving baskets and mats to be sold at market or even as seasonal farm laborers. But because they lived so close to the cutting edge of matter and spirit, body and soul, heaven and earth, they were seen as special humanbeings, stewards of mysteries and meditators for humanity. (Williams 2005, 126)

So acedia is similar to *Chan sickness* in that:

- there is a lack of balance (e.g., pursuing an ascetic regimen)
- there are sometimes demons

• it is different from depression (depression generally has an identifiable and external cause that acedia lacks; depression is amenable to treatment in ways that acedia is not)

• it is an occupational hazard of monastics.

But I would assert then that *Chan sickness* is different from acedia in that:

• it is often encountered as a painful vision or physical sensation during meditation

• it can be a prideful over-attachment to Chan practice, rather than an avoidance of it

• it is not a weariness with Chan but a frustration experienced during meditation

• it is not specifically tied to the noon hour or to desert practice.

Turning to the issue of depression, one can see that there are marked differences between it and *Chan sickness.*

Depression

Philip Martin offers several vivid images for understanding the nature of depression, and also offers exercises and visualization techniques for using Zen meditation to conquer depression. His descriptions of depression as being lost, feeling hopeless and stuck help differentiate depression from acedia and also from *Chan sickness.* Martin informs us that "[t]he gray place that depression is can be frightening and disorienting." He notes that it can have the lifeless feel of being in a desert, lonely and isolated, or another time, being consumed by the darkness of an overgrown forest, with unknown terrors lurking out of sight. Martin also

presents an analogy of being at the bottom of the ocean, beaten down by the pressure and unable to breathe. No matter which simile applies, the pervasive feeling is that there is no escape. "You are truly lost" (Martin 1999, 1).

Beyond grief and sadness, Martin notes that depression is underscored by "hopelessness, a sense of worthlessness, and a more insistent awareness of death." He cautions that dealing with depression demands that instead of merely reacting to it, it is important to examine the raw feelings that comprise it, and by doing so, face the deepest difficulties and emotions in our own personal sphere (Martin 1999, 3-4).

> Buddha made a distinction between pain and suffering. This is a distinction we seldom make. Simple uncomplicated pain is something we cannot avoid. The word *dukkha* refers to all the ways in which we complicate our pain through our rush to avoid it—and all the ways in which we make ourselves suffer as a result.
>
> In depression we experience intense pain that is both physical and mental. We also frequently complicate that pain through our attempts to get away from it. And often we are unaware of just how much we are suffering, because we are so involved in trying to outrun our pain, or ignore it, or cover it up with anger. (Martin 1999, 11)

Martin points to 18th century Master Hakuin's example of using great doubt as a foundation of Zen practice. Indeed, Martin suggests that doubt is often a motivator for the student to try Zen meditation in the first place, doubt over self identity, the painfulness of life, and how we can live each day with the knowledge that one day we will die. Martin posits that one should use this feeling of doubt as a tool to meditate, and process these ideas until it fills our entire being. In this

way, doubt becomes a useful construct, even if we acknowledge that we may never totally resolve the initial premises we examine.

> This means that we continually question; we never simply accept the answers others give us. It means that we do not hold on to the answers even when we have discovered them for ourselves.
>
> If we can live with this doubt, we can then be continually ready to be surprised—by life, by ourselves, by our answers, by our experience.
>
> My teacher, Katagiri Roshi, liked to say that we study something only to understand how little we know about it. To live in doubt is to live in mystery, to let mystery be large and vital in our lives. Human life is bigger than anything we can ever believe or understand about it.
>
> That is why the doubt we are given in depression is a gift and a great teaching. (Martin 1999, 29-30)

Martin offers a number of meditations and exercises aimed at healing the soul suffering from despair. In a chapter entitled, "A Path through Depression," he suggests a way out of depression, by visualizing the place where you imagine it to be.

> If you have been here a number of times, you know this place well. You may even feel comfortable here. You have found it is no longer a terrifying place, and that there can much of value in this place.
>
> As you return, envision that in this place there is now a path to be found. Perhaps it is a trail that has been worn through the dark forest you were in, or a star to follow to guide yourself out of a deep desert night—or a lifeline you can follow from deep beneath the sea.
>
> Look closely at this path, this trail, until it becomes clear to you. Realize that there is a way out of this place you once thought you would be lost in forever. Are you ready to leave? Are you perhaps surprised to find you are sad at the prospect of leaving? Are you ready to begin the journey? Is there freedom or relief in starting out on your way? (Martin 1999, 78-79)

Martin's approach to finding a path out of depression, using meditative approaches, suggests that depression really is something different from *Chan sickness.* His characterizations of depression make it clear that it is a condition far more pervasive and long-lasting than one brought on by or experienced during the meditation process.

In Mark Epstein's *Psychotherapy Without The Self,* he describes the Buddhist approach to dealing with depression.

> [T]he First Noble Truth asserts the universality of *dukkha*, suffering or, in a better translation, pervasive unsatisfactoriness. Is the hopelessness of depression, the pain of anxiety, or the discomfort of dysphoria simply a manifestation of *dukkha*, or do we do ourselves and the *dharma* a disservice to expect any kind of mental pain to dissolve once it become an object of meditative awareness? The great power of Buddhism lies in its assertion that all of the stuff of the neurotic mind can become fodder for enlightenment, that liberation of the mind is possible without resolution of all the neuroses. Many Westerners feel an immediate relief in this view. They find they are accepted by their *dharma* teachers as they are, and this attitude of unconditional acceptance and love is one that evokes deep appreciation and gratitude. This is a priceless contribution of Buddhist psychology—it offers the potential of transforming what often becomes a stalemate in psychotherapy, when the neurotic core is exposed but nothing can be done to eradicate it. (Epstein 2007, 142)
>
> The focus, in Buddhist psychology, is always on the existential plight of the subjective ego . . . It is this existential longing for meaning or completion and the inner feelings of emptiness, hollowness, isolation, fear, anxiety, or incompleteness that Buddhist psychology approaches most directly. Depression, as a critical entity, is rarely addressed. The fifty-two mental factors of the *Abhidhamma* (the psychological texts

> of traditional Buddhism), for example, list a compendium of afflictive emotions such as greed, hatred, conceit, envy, doubt, worry, restlessness, and avarice, but do not even include sadness except as a kind of unpleasant feeling that can tinge other mental states. Depression is not mentioned. (Epstein 2007, 144-145)
>
> The psychiatric tradition with the most experience differentiating existential from biological mental illness is probably the Tibetan one, which developed in a culture and society completely immersed in the theory and practice of Buddhism. The Tibetan medical authorities recognize a host of "mental illnesses," it turns out, for which they recommend pharmaceutical, not meditative, interventions, including many that correspond to Western diagnoses of depression, melancholia, panic, manic-depression, and psychosis. Not only do they not always counsel meditation as a first line of treatment, they also recognize that meditation can often make such conditions worse. Indeed, it is well known that meditation, itself, can provoke a psychiatric condition, an obsessive anxiety state, which is a direct result of trying to force the mind in a rigid and unyielding way to stay on the object of awareness. (Epstein 2007, 149)

In describing patients who had been prescribed medications to treat their depression and yet resisted the idea of medicating due to their faith in their Buddhist practices, Epstein provides some interesting examples.

> Peggy was convinced she was doomed to repeat her mother's deterioration; she felt she had failed as a Buddhist and yet was resistant to seeing her depression as a condition that warranted treatment with medication. She got better after about four months of taking antidepressants, which she took for a year and has not needed since. While depressed, she was simply unable to muster the concentration necessary to meditate effectively, the "ultimate view" that Kalu Rinpoche describes was unavailable to her consciousness.
>
> Gideon's condition was manic-depression, an episodic mood disturbance that usually first

> manifests in young adulthood and can cause either recurrent depressions, ecstatic highs, or some combination thereof. . . . Gideon was markedly resistant to the idea that he had this illness, however, and he was equally resistant to the idea of taking Lithium, quoting the *dharma* to the effect of "letting the mind rest in its natural state" to support his refusal to take medication.
>
> There are undoubtedly *dharma* practitioners who are depriving themselves in the same way, out of a similar faith in the universality of their ideology. Such people would do well to remember the Buddha's teachings of the Middle Path, especially his counsel against the search for happiness through self-mortification in different forms of asceticism, which he called "painful, unworthy, and unprofitable." To suffer from psychiatric illness willfully, when treatment is mercifully available, is but a contemporary ascetic practice. The Buddha himself tried such ascetic practices, but gave them up. His counsel is worth keeping. (Epstein 2007, 152)

To sum up, then, depression may be similar to *Chan sickness* in that:

• it is an obstacle to progress

• it can involve painful physical and mental experiences

• it can be fearful and terrifying.

But I believe *Chan sickness* is different from depression because:

• one can be depressed without meditating or prior to meditation

• depression can be an underlying cause of *Chan sickness*

• *Chan sickness* can be triggered by disturbing visions or hallucinations, which may have nothing to do with mood disorders (as classified by the DSM IV TR or ICD 10), such as depressive disorders, bipolar disorders, or substance-induced mood disorders

• *Chan sickness* as pride/attachment to enlightenment experiences has little or nothing to do with low mood, low self-esteem or a loss of interest or pleasure.

As noted in Chapter 5, Epstein suggests that the depressive personality can benefit from meditation/concentration practices to release feelings of love, joy, contentment, and oneness. This suggests to me that if Epstein believes meditation can benefit a depressive personality, then the risk of *Chan sickness* must be unrelated to depression, otherwise he would not prescribe meditation for anyone undergoing depression.

To recap, although there may be overlaps and similarities between acedia, depression, and *Chan sickness,* they do appear to be quite different disorders. This is especially true when one considers that of the three, *Chan sickness* appears to be an umbrella term encompassing at least four separate causations (*see* Sheng-yen's description in Chapter 4).

CHAPTER 7

METHODOLOGY: PHENOMENOLOGICAL-QUALITATIVE MODEL

In the Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction, each experience is considered in its singularity, in and for itself. The phenomenon is perceived and described in its totality, in a fresh and open way. A complete description is given of its essential constituents, variations of perceptions, thoughts, feelings, sounds, colors, and shapes.

-Clark Moustakas
"Transcendental Phenomenology"
Phenomenological Research Methods
(Moustakas 1994, 34)

Human Science Research

Moustakas describes the common features that such research models as Ethnography, Grounded Research Theory, Hermeneutics, Empirical Phenomenology, and Heuristics share and how those features distinguish them from traditional, natural science, quantitative research theories and methodologies. The common features are:

1. recognizing the value of qualitative designs and methodologies, studies of human experiences that are not approachable through quantitative approaches
2. focusing on the wholeness of experience rather than solely on its objects or parts
3. searching for meanings and essences of experience rather than measurements and explanations
4. obtaining descriptions of experience through first-person accounts in informal and formal conversations and interviews
5. regarding the data of experience as imperative in understanding human behavior and as evidence for scientific investigations
6. formulating questions and problems that reflect the interest, involvement, and personal commitment of the researcher, and
7. viewing experience and behavior as an integrated and inseparable relationship of subject

> and object and of parts and whole. (Moustakas 1994, 21)

In undertaking the design of my research survey questionnaire to be circulated to Zen meditation teachers around the country, I endeavored to incorporate these goals. The transcendental phenomenological model made logical sense to me because I was dealing with a human science question that depended more upon the quality of the answers than the statistical greatness of the volume of responses. Although I performed a simple statistical breakdown of my survey results, my guiding principle was the quest to understand human behavior.

As Moustakas describes the transcendental phenomenological model, he ascribes to it qualities that I found enormously supportive and useful in guiding my survey design.

> The researcher following a transcendental phenomenological approach engages in disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated (known as the Epoche process) in order to launch the study as far as possible free of preconceptions, beliefs, and knowledge of the phenomenon from prior experience and professional studies—to be completely open, receptive, and naïve in listening to and hearing research participants describe their experience of the phenomenon being investigated.
>
> Another major distinction is the emphasis on intuition, imagination, and universal structures in obtaining a picture of the dynamics that underlay the experience, account for, and provide an understanding of how it is that particular perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and sensual awarenesses are evoked in consciousness with reference to a specific experience such as jealousy, anger, or joy. (Moustakas 1994, 21-22)

> In the Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction, each experience is considered in its singularity, in and for itself. The phenomenon is perceived and described in its totality, in a fresh and open way. A complete description is given of its essential constituents, variations of perceptions, thoughts, feelings, sounds, colors, and shapes.
>
> Ultimately, through the Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction we derive a textural description of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon, the constituents that comprise the experience in consciousness, from the vantage point of an open self. From this perspective, "the content of experience is dependent on myself as subject; experience presents to me its claim to validity: I must certify this claim...I, as a subject, (am)...not only the source of validity of experience, but also of its significance." (Moustakas 1994, 34, inner citation omitted)

Considerations in Designing the Questionnaire

In designing the *Chan sickness* questionnaire, I wanted to craft a survey that would generate some possible definitions of the term. So I was really after qualitative answers rather than just quantitative ones.

At the same time, I wanted the questionnaire to be interesting enough to respondents that they would take the 30 – 45 minutes necessary to fill it out. For it to engage the respondent, I wanted to include a variety of yes/no, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions.

Consulting best practices lists, I was also aware of the need to present a well-organized survey, a good flow to the questionnaire, and a reasonable length to the questionnaire. Additionally, I tried to be specific without being too wordy; avoid asking loaded questions; and avoid double negatives. (Strowman, Shelley, http://my.simmons.edu/services/technology/ptrc/pdf/survey_design.pdf).

For topics that I felt might be difficult to self-disclose, I tried to put the respondent at ease by offering him/her the opportunity to recount an experience relayed by a colleague (unnamed).

In my respondents' list of rights, I guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. Not only is this a standard feature of most human subject research, it also made sense in the Chan/Zen field, since it is likely that colleagues might recognize attributed quotations from their colleagues.

I included a cover letter laying out my reasons for conducting the research, including some sample dictionary definitions. As well, I included a postage prepaid envelope so that respondents could simply complete the questionnaire and then drop the survey into the mail.

Since I was looking to see if I could divine a better working definition for *Chan sickness,* I was eager to allow respondents the freedom to supply as many or as few words as they wanted to use. Similarly, I provided an opportunity to add any additional/other thoughts or reactions the respondent might wish to convey. I felt this was useful in encouraging respondents to say what they really thought, especially if I hadn't already provided an acceptable avenue for them to do so.

As discussed in the next chapter on results, I believe my survey design achieved its goals quite handsomely. A number of respondents took great pains to tell me what they really thought, even if it meant denying the existence of something called *Chan sickness.* I knew from the outset that there might be meditation teachers who would regard the topic as heretical, or possibly as a threat to the efficacy or soundness of Zen training. Though I did receive some

'push back' responses, the responses I received generally contained little vitriol. I must assume that those individuals who objected strenuously to my topic as insinuating or accusative chose simply not to respond to or return the questionnaire.

Although I have provided some statistical analysis of my survey results, *see* Chapter 8: Summary: Implications and Outcomes, I think the greater benefits are the quality and heartfelt nature of the observations shared. Whether a situation was recounted by an individual respondent or by several, it is meaningful and significant in advancing our understanding of *Chan sickness.*

CHAPTER 8

SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS AND OUTCOMES

Thirty years ago, before I practiced Ch'an, I saw that mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers. However, after having achieved intimate knowledge and having gotten a way in, I saw that mountains are not mountains and rivers are not rivers. But now that I have found rest, as before I see mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers.

-Master Qingyuan, Compendium of the Five Lamps (Wudeng Huiyuan, 1252)
quoted in Master Yunmen: From the Record of the Ch'an Teacher Gate of the Clouds
(App 1994, 111-2)

Summary

Based on the results of my *Chan sickness* questionnaire (*see* below), I believe that there is a meaningful entity or entities called *Chan sickness.* There is a wide distribution of possible definitions expressed by the survey respondents, due in large part to the fact that references heretofore have failed to specify either the same definition or include the array of different meanings and variations ascribed to the term. I believe, after weighing the survey results and the definitions suggested by those such as Master Sheng-yen, a multi-part definition is required, as the term has evolved over time to include multiple conditions. In effect, one of my initial assumptions was that *Chan sickness (Zen sickness,* or *meditation sickness/illness)* was an umbrella term, like 'the common cold,' a headache, or malaise, that contains within it many possibilities and variations.

> **Chan sickness** (Ch., *chan bing;* Jp., *zenbyo*) is an out-of-balance condition which acts as an obstruction to progress in Chan meditation practice, due to: (1) meditating too intensely; (2) meditating

under inhospitable conditions (cold, damp, etc.); (3) meditating with improper posture or alignment; (4) straining to achieve a supramundane state, ability or power; (5) an adverse psychological reaction due to an underlying psychological condition such as narcissistic personality, borderline personality, depressive personality, etc., or the recall of past traumatic events, which emerge(s) during meditation; (6) hallucinations, visions of demons (Ch., *mo ching;* or Jp., *makyo*); or (7) a prideful or conceited attitude wherein the practitioner promotes Zen relentlessly and reminds others that he/she has had an enlightenment experience.

Implications

So is there one concise definition of *Chan sickness?* Although that might be the tidiest possible solution, both my literature review and on-the-ground research revealed that there are multiple meanings. So it might be possible to say one was suffering from *Chan sickness*, or one is suffering from a *Chan sickness.* Clearly, the term can refer to a physical malady, an intense psychological experience, or an inflated sense of attachment and self-worth based on one's belief that one has experienced enlightenment and is, therefore, superior.

Even though the survey revealed that most meditation teachers have heard of *Chan sickness,* and most have some idea of what it is, the written sources

currently available do not agree upon what *Chan sickness* is, thus making it difficult for meditation teachers to access a reliable description.

As far as preventing *Chan sickness,* we have several options, depending upon which type. If it is due to inhospitable meditation hall conditions or schedules, we can certainly control and improve that for the meditator. If the meditator is straining too hard for enlightenment or exhibiting other out-of-balance behaviors, we can prescribe a break from meditation, a visit to a therapist or other counseling professional, or a break-up activity such as *kinhin* or other physical activity to help the meditator regain balance. If it is a demonic appearance or some mental residua or traumatic memory arising from the memory of the meditator, we can prescribe a different sort of meditation practice more suitable, a break from meditation altogether, a visit to a therapist or other counseling professional, or perhaps compassion practices. If the Chan student is overly aggrandized and unduly focused on everything Zen, perhaps in *sanzen* or other one-on-one conversation, the master can help the student to gain a greater perspective and release the attachment to feeling superior, perhaps by skillful means such as a more challenging koan assignment. It is historically the master's job to keep the Zen student on his/her toes and pursuing the great doubt.

So I would advocate for a dictionary definition of *Chan sickness* that incorporates the various possibilities, adding a definition that could summarize that it represents a situation of being out-of-balance and requiring assistance from the meditation teacher or master to restore the Middle Path to the meditator. By doing so, the meditator can hopefully overcome their stuckness and move on to a

lifelong practice, rather than experiencing terror or frustration and leaving Zen practice altogether. The delicate balance, of course, is the teacher being able to identify and counsel, without necessarily wanting to pre-warn all students, since this, too, might scare some away. And it is my belief, based on the experience of Aronson and Epstein, among others, that there is no shame in realizing that Chan meditation practices cannot serve as therapy for all of contemporary Western students' issues. And as well, no shame in recommending therapy for psychological issues that might impede the student's ability to continue meditation practice. Indeed, Aronson and Epstein argue that the combination of meditation and therapy can successfully integrate the student's spiritual and psychological issues and expectations.

In the training of meditation teachers, particularly in the U.S., I believe that based on my research, it is essential that there be some mention of the possibility(ies) of *Chan sickness* that arises in their meditation students. The reason for this is basic preparedness. Even if *Chan sickness* is quite rare, as espoused by Master Sheng-yen, the meditation teacher must be alert to the signs and symptoms, if only to be able to refer a student to seek outside help. Indeed, I would not expect that most teachers would have the intensive psychological training to take on the treatment of *Chan sickness* as psychotherapist Jack Kornfield, for example, does with students at Spirit Rock. Alternatively, as revealed by my survey respondents, there are preventive measure such as compassion practices, lovingkindness meditations, physical labor, and koan study that can be employed to alleviate some variations of *Chan sickness.* However, in

the case of a pre-existing physical or psychological condition, I would speculate that outside help might be the more logical recommendation.

To be sure, a meditation student in distress who had no opportunity to discuss an overwhelmingly negative reaction experienced during meditation with a qualified teacher, might simply abandon Chan/Zen practice altogether as inappropriate for their own needs or path. But with enough alert attention on the part of the master or teacher, and the opportunity to solicit reactions and feedback, the student in distress might be better directed to resolve whatever physical or psychological variation of *Chan sickness* presents, in order to continue the benefits of Chan practice.

Outcomes

Survey Design

In planning the range of questions for the *Chan sickness* survey, I had several considerations in mind. First, I did not want to alienate or offend the potential survey respondent. I was determined to accomplish the research in an open-minded and beginner's mind kind of way. I didn't want there to be so many questions that a Zen teacher would be intimidated to even begin. And I wanted to gain some perspectives on whether the teacher had experienced something called *Chan sickness* themselves, if they had observed it in their meditation students, or if they had heard any anecdotal evidence of *Chan sickness* affecting their colleagues' students. By asking these questions in a rather generalized manner, and by not requiring specific information involving names, dates, genders, etc. of the incidents, I hoped to make the teachers more comfortable in relating what they chose to relate without fear of reprisal. I am very grateful for the candid responses

that I received, and for the courage of the participant meditation teachers who responded, willing to go out on a limb with me on this journey.

Before finalizing the questionnaire, I was deeply influenced by a conversation I had held with a Zen teacher who was not convinced that there really was something that could be described as *Chan sickness.* In this initial rebuff, I experienced what I believed to be a tendency for the researcher to reify the expected outcome to such a degree that anyone who doesn't share the hypothesis becomes a skeptic or an obstacle. I think this early conversation also served to prepare me for the possibility that there might be a wide range of opinions and insights into the problem, depending on what experiences the respondents might have had surrounding *Chan sickness.* I wanted to remain open to the possibility that respondents might decline to buy into the possibility of something called Chan sickness—this certainly would be supported by the lack of easily locatable dictionary references to the condition. And I was also prepared to accept the possibility that, as Master Sheng-yen cautions, the condition is quite rare.

Additionally, I wanted to be sensitive to the perception that students bring their own baggage to Zen meditation, and if they encountered troubling visions or painful negative experiences in their meditation practice, it was not the Zen meditation that was at fault. Indeed, I wanted to resist stigmatizing the condition so as not to place any blame in any direction. As stated earlier, Aronson, Epstein and others caution that students coming to Zen with the expectation that it will resolve all of their psychological "issues" are bound to hit a point of

dissatisfaction. Besides which, there are several personality disorders that may make candidates particularly sensitive to certain forms of meditation. Epstein categorizes those in significant detail. And I did not want to intimate to my meditation teacher respondents that they needed to be experts in (Western) psychology in order to be effective meditation teachers. I would assert that meditation teachers in the West need to be alert to the signs of psychological issues that may be best handled by a psychologist or psychiatrist rather than by continued Zen meditation. I was gratified to learn that a number of my survey respondents seemed willing and able to refer students to such help outside of the *zendo*.

As I was analyzing the survey responses, my driving questions were these: (1) do the survey respondents agree that there is such a thing as *Chan sickness?* (2) is there consensus on what *Chan sickness* is? (3) do Chan/Zen teachers have a common approach to handling *Chan sickness?* And (4) do Chan/Zen teachers believe that *Chan sickness* is preventable, and if so, how.

Survey Time Period

This survey was conducted chiefly in 2009, mailed to 156 Chan/Zen centers throughout the United States from San Francisco. The surveys were sent out on September 4, 2009 and returned by February 10, 2010.

Survey Responses by the Numbers

For the list selection of zen teachers to serve as possible survey respondents, I selected an internet list of American Zen Teachers, a list of the San Francisco Zen Center associated *sanghas*, and an online list of Dharma Drum Mountain Chan Centers founded by Master Sheng-yen. Of the original 156

surveys mailed, 16 were returned as bad addresses, leaving 140 surveys counted as successfully sent. Of the 140 surveys, 25 responses were tallied, for an overall response rate of 18%.

When I inquired about their training lineage, respondents reported Soto zen to Rinzai at a rate of about 3-to-1. There were other lineages reported by the respondent meditation teachers, including Korean, Harada, and Kamon doz.

When asked about the lineage at their zen center, the ratio of Soto zen to Rinzai responses jumped to nearly 4-to-1. Other lineages listed included Lam Te, Cohgye, White Plum, and Integral.

When I inquired as to whether respondents recalled having ever read anything about *Zen sickness,* 84% said yes, 16% no. Although several of the respondents could not recall where they had read about *Zen sickness,* those who could remember cited to Hakuin, Mamon, *The Three Pillars of Zen,* and Koans.

When I asked about whether the subject of *Zen sickness* ever came up in the respondent's training to become a meditation teacher, 68% said yes, 32% no. Some respondents reported that it was discussed as a psychological affliction, while one respondent reported instruction on *makyo* ("deceptive appearances and feeling that can arise in the practice of *zazen*").

When asked if, based on their teaching experience as meditation teachers, they believed if there exists a condition or conditions that could be described by the term *Zen sickness,* 80% said yes, 20% no.

When asked if they had ever experienced *Zen sickness* themselves, only 44% of respondents said yes, 56% no.

When asked if in their meditation center setting there was occasion to meet face-to-face with their long-term meditation students/practitioners, 88% said yes, 12% no. I felt it was important to determine if students had the opportunity to present any difficulties they might be experiencing during meditation, and so I was relieved to learn that the vast majority of meditation centers have opportunities for the teacher to interact with the student in a one-on-one setting. This was perhaps prompted by my own experience as a drop-in meditator, where there were certainly question-and-answer sessions after the Saturday morning *dharma* talks, but not really a one-on-one model. My assumption is, of course, that if I were more than a drop-in, I would have ample opportunities even at my local zen center to report any disturbing effects or questionable experiences during meditation.

When I inquired as to whether the instructor or any of their colleagues had noticed and reported on any instances of students experiencing *Zen sickness,* 60% said yes, 40% no. While this is not conclusive, it does perhaps point to the fact that *Zen sickness* may be somewhat rare in the general population of meditators.

When asked if there had ever been a situation wherein the meditation teacher had recommended that a student take some time off from meditation to consult with someone else (counselor, therapist, medical professional, etc.) about difficulties experienced during meditation, 76% answered yes, 24% no. Especially in light of responses to the prior question about instances observed of *Zen sickness,* I was surprised and encouraged by the number of responses that pointed to a willingness to correct negative experiences, even if it meant prescribing a

short break from the activity of meditation. Again, one of my biggest concerns at the outset of the research was that meditation teachers might rebel against any insinuation that zen meditation was the cause of any difficulties among their students. As discussed more fully in Chapter 6, I feel quite strongly that there is no blame to be assigned in the investigation of negative experiences during meditation. It is entirely possible that the act of meditation has merely brought other difficult memories or underlying psychological conditions to the surface. In that light, there is the opportunity in *Zen sickness* for an important discovery to take place about the psychological or physical condition of the individual.

Students Experiencing Zen Sickness

In response to my question about whether any of the respondent's long-term practitioners had experienced *Zen sickness,* I received a range of responses, including the following:

• I have seen it manifest in others psychologically as over-confidence in an individual's perception of their level of attainment in practice.

• Yes. Physical, social, physiological, psychological and spiritual – often harmful at many levels, particularly if there is pre-existing trauma.

• One practitioner (not long-term) was "seeing" (hallucinating) gold balls during zazen. She also had dreams of Buddha telling her to commit suicide in order to get to a better rebirth.

Meditation Teacher Recommending A Break For Outside Help

In response to my question about encountering a situation wherein the teacher recommended that the student experiencing difficulty take some time off

from meditating to consult an outside counselor or medical professional, I received a range of responses, including the following:

- Yes. A student had a powerful repressed memory arise during dokusan that involved sexual abuse at a pre-verbal stage. I asked her to refrain from meditation until she began work with a qualified therapist.
- Yes. When prolonged sitting destabilized them or uncovered physical or psychological issues – they needed to address the basic issues before returning.
- Yes. When (serious) emotional trauma that has not been treated or dealt with comes up, it can be overwhelming.
- Yes. Many damaged people come to zen when they really need therapy.

Respondent-Suggested Dictionary Definitions

When I asked respondents to write a brief description of *Zen sickness* for a Zen dictionary, I received a range of responses, including the following:

- Following periods of intensive practice, the arising of thoughts and feelings that one has transcended moral and psychological boundaries that previously limited or contained one's actions or conduct.
- A state of physical or mental delusion that distracts or even obstructs the meditation practice of moment-by-moment awareness, leading to concretization of the ego self rather than selflessness.
- The person is drawn (sometimes compulsively/addictively) to types of practice or intensity levels that their body/mind doesn't yet have the foundation/breadth/depth to sustain.

• (1) A vague term used sometimes to describe a form of attachment to a pure form of emptiness beyond limits of ordinary life that bypasses the checks and balances on behavior of the Buddhist precepts; (2) Symptoms of anxiety, depression, nervousness and oversensitivity brought on by or reinforced by prolonged intensive sitting meditation practice.

• An energetic imbalance resulting in physical and psychological symptoms resulting from excessive efforts meeting energetic blocked channels (e.g., acupuncture meridians, chakras).

• Drying up with apparent equanimity that is in fact shutting down. This *Zen sickness* is epidemic.

• Severe anxiety, emotion or pain, resulting from previous trauma, coming to the surface when mind and body are still.

• A psychological condition of obsessive or excessive attachment to delusion about zen practice (meditation, bowing, etc.) that results in distorted reality impacting functioning.

• A delusional state of mind intensified by isolation and absorption.

• Usually typified by a feeling (temporary) of exaggerated "knowing the truth" (maybe they do?)

• *Zen sickness* is a clinging to special state of mind(s) often manifested by suppression of uncomfortable unresolved feelings while "enjoying" a calm mind.

• There are two forms: one is the ego trip that can follow a *kensho* ("seeing into") experience. The other is *makyo*, which generally comes up at

specific times during one's practice history. The former stems from an idea that—as the Japanese Zen master Hakuin described it when it happened to him—one has had a superior enlightenment experience which makes one superior to others. The latter comes as a result of the self-image, beginning to be pinned down and possibly seen for what it is, throws sand in one's face, so to speak. Hallucinations such as intensive smells, sights, sounds, a sure sense that one's body is contorted in ways that, it actually is not, can come up during this time, as well as seemingly VERY important things one has to think about/do that would take one away from one's practice. Strong emotions can also come up.

• Stuck on emptiness, stuck on accomplishment.

• Probably something about expectations. I think our problem . . . was expectation of some great transformative experience, which doesn't seem to have happened in any dramatic way among the people I've trained with. More like continuous smaller insights which softened us. After all, many of us have seemed to have fallen into teaching roles perhaps without quite knowing what we were doing, and have boosted ourselves by our bootstraps over the years as we have worked through our emotional confusions, conflicts, etc. with power competition, insecurity, etc.

• The negative mental and physical condition resulting from an improper view of the practice of meditation or incorrect attitude toward the experiences that arise during meditation (the incorrect view is a view of

permanence whereby one attaches to any and all phenomena; the incorrect attitude is namely either grasping at or rejecting the experience).

Steps to Prevent Zen Sickness

When I asked respondents if there were any steps they might take as a meditation teacher to prevent the occurrence of *Zen sickness* in their students/practitioners, I received a range of responses, including the following:

- I would not seek to prevent is occurrence; I would rather seek to help fellow practitioners recognized the symptoms, with the thought that recognizing the symptoms will prevent the disease.
- Yes. The ancient Tendai term for seated meditation is *shi-kan* (samatha-vipassana) yet in our American transmissions we often forget the nourishing practices of samatha – the steps are in the samatha teachings.
- (1) Give frequent talks on balance in practice – between perspectives – emptiness or formlessness and ethical/practical considerations; (2) Familiarize students with possible risks of intensive meditation practice; (3) Encourage students to seek medical and psychological resources beyond their meditation center teacher or practice.
- A zen dojo is not the place for people with serious mental disorders. A dojo is not a mental hospital.
- Walking, swimming, singing, dancing, yoga, tai chi, and qi gong.
- Encourage non-attachment and the exercise of the selfless self through relationship.
- Face truth of emotional challenges.

• Help ground people.

• Deal with (serious) emotional trauma or addictions before, during or after sitting, via therapy or 12-step.

• Encourage the student to go at his/her own natural pace. Do not compare yourself (your practice) with anyone else's. Don't create image of what you should or should not be. Don't place labels on yourself or others and then react to those labels. Feel directly what is happening, without any labels, descriptions, interpretations. "What is it if you do not give it a name?" So often students are reacting to their thoughts about what they are experiencing rather than to the experience itself. When this is clearly seen, then the experience is not so gripping and the body naturally takes care of the situation.

• Yes. Work, focus, attention. If there are symptoms, deal with them.

• Yes. Keep checking in with the student. Almost everyone who does practice extensively will run the gamut of emotions, high and low.

• Talk with them, looking for misapplied effort; for physical imbalance in sitting posture; for any interference with breath.

• Yes. Hard physical work practice; short *zazen* periods; strict schedule; no sitting alone.

• I speak of *makyo* periodically—especially when it is clear to me during a retreat (where most *makyo* occur) that one or more of my students is experiencing it. As for what I usually consider *"Zen sickness"*—which is the "head upon one's head," as it has been described, following a *kensho*—

I may mention it during a teisho (Zen talk), but generally I don't mention it otherwise. If/when a student has a *kensho* experience, I would use the same techniques that were used with me, which are to let the person in question know that it's not extraordinary, and then assign them a koan that is near-unsolvable following that. Periodically, too, in teaching koans, I would hold a person on a koan longer than they might have expected, and demand a deeper understanding of it before I passed them. There's no real preventing of *makyo*, in my experience, beyond warning people it can happen—and that may only mitigate it rather than prevent it.

• Push and pull. *Dokusan* (face-to-face) is a resource. Encourage continuity through all experiences.

• I simply meet whatever situation arises at the time, reaching out to colleagues for help when I don't know what is going on. The people who seem to have the most confidence and experience in this area seem to me to be psychologists who name issues in psychological terms. I have not had psychological training, and have come to feel it would have been helpful if I had.

• I've learned the importance of informally assessing the psycho-physical state of new practitioners, looking for signs of instability, and doing the same on an ongoing basis, especially in our intensive meditation retreats, when participants are urged to exert themselves beyond their psychological and physical comfort zones. We also have fairly thorough

application forms for both our retreats and general membership that include questions about psychological and medical history.

• Teach them to see all experiences as illusory, transient phenomena. Don't seek or fear any of them. Don't make a big deal out of your experiences. Emphasize the attitude of non-attachment; teach Right View.

Other Reactions to the Term Zen Sickness

In concluding the survey, I asked respondents if they had any other reactions to the term Zen sickness that they wished to relate, and I received a range of responses, including the following:

• This is a big topic on which I could probably speak for a year. I have a lot of practical experience on the subject. Often it's a matter of deep listening/appropriate response that comes forth from many years of experience with the yogic side of meditation practice.

• [I]f a person is already vulnerable to psychic/emotional disturbance or coping with PTSD or childhood abuse, doing intensive Zen practice (all zen practice is by definition intensive) can make the above conditions unmanageable and increase symptoms and distress.

• [A] term that could be used for using Zen practice to cease exploration rather than pursue it.

• I associate “attainment/attaining enlightenment” as a goal of mediation or a felt pressure or intensity that has been internalized as a common source for this, coupled with an individual's personal history.

• We follow a strict schedule of *zazen*, services, meals, work, study. Having a teacher is essential. Variety of tasks helps integrate zen mind into all activities.

• I question the perspective of your source that described *Zen sickness* as "toxic side effect of prolonged meditation which, because it induces profound relaxation, makes a person more aware of painful emotions and memories." Although such events can be real I would neither categorize them as *Zen sickness* nor call them a "toxic side effect of prolonged meditation." Moreover, Zen meditation, while it can lead to relaxation during which memories can begin to come up, does not induce profound relaxation in a way that would make a person more aware of painful emotions and memories. In my experience, people who have deep psychological wounds do not allow themselves "profound relaxation."

• I've always been unclear what it meant, but since it's just a label, it never seemed important to investigate the definition. What is important is to respond appropriately to whatever physiological or psychological problem my students have as they arise. Whatever we understand the term to mean, exactly, I would see it not as a direct but an indirect effect of Zen practice/training, which never "adds" something to the person but merely exposes, or uncovers, an underlying (pre-)condition.

• Even though a practitioner may have many "negative" reactions in the course of meditation, such as physical/mental illusions, as long as he has the correct conceptual view and thus has the right attitude towards those

reactions, it will not become a sickness, rather it's just a natural phenomenon.

The Multiple Choice Question

Lastly, in an effort to characterize the most widely held views of Zen sickness, I posed a list of multiple-choice options for the term Zen sickness. Respondents were encouraged to choose as many answers as they felt applied. The top three responses were:

e. a description of a psychological condition (12 responses);

c. a term that has many meanings (11 responses); and

f. a description of a combination of physical and psychological symptoms (11 responses).

Conclusions Based on the Survey

So what conclusions can be made based on the above responses to the survey questionnaire? I believe there are several conclusions, perhaps pointing to the richness of the topic and the potential to address and explore the nuances more fully in future studies.

The respondents reinforced the notion that there really is something called *Zen sickness.* Though they offered many varied possible definitions, there were many common threads, including the themes of a practice that might be out of balance and requiring some correction on the part of the teacher/master in the form of face-to-face discussion, varying the practice to include other physicality beyond *zazen* (e.g., walking meditation, work practice such as gardening, etc.), additional koan study and so on. To be sure, though not all respondents agreed

that Zen meditation can bring up underlying psychological problems (memories of abuse, trauma, etc.), a number did attest to this in their students. And as mentioned by at least one respondent, it is not necessarily zen meditation as a cause, but zen meditation as a revealer of obstruction.

Overall, I was heartened that teachers understand the value of checking in with practitioners to do a rather constant assessment of their practice. This echoes Master Sheng-yen's enumeration of the duties of the master to the student. It also underscores the core of the Zen mode of mind-to-mind transmission. The complex relationship of master to student is vital in ensuring that the student doesn't wander off into dangerous territory unaccompanied. And as the psychologists caution, there are many conditions which require deft handling beyond meditation practice alone. It is no sleight to Chan/Zen meditation that sometimes a different approach to untangling knots may best be handled outside of the *zendo*.

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Appendix A: Sample Questionnaire

2009 QUESTIONNAIRE ON 'ZEN SICKNESS'
(also 'Chan Sickness' or 'Meditation Sickness')

for tracking purposes only:

Name: ______________________________

Title: ______________________________

Center: ______________________________

1. Briefly describe your Zen/Chan training and lineage (Soto, Rinzai, etc.)

2. What tradition does your meditation center embrace (Soto, Rinzai, etc.)?

3. Have you ever read about Zen Sickness? If so, do you remember the source and what you read?

4. Did the subject of Zen Sickness ever come up in your training to become a teacher/master? If so, was it presented as a psychological affliction, a physiological affliction, or some combination?

5. Based on your experience as a meditation teacher, do you believe there is a condition or conditions that could be described by the term Zen Sickness?

6. Have you ever experienced Zen Sickness yourself? If so, how did you resolve it?

7. In your meditation center, do you have occasion to meet face-to-face with your long-term meditation students/practitioners?

8. If your students/practitioners were experiencing any extreme difficulties during meditation, would they have the opportunity to discuss these difficulties with you during a face-to-face meeting?

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9. Have any of your long-term students/practitioners (or have you heard of any instances from your teacher colleagues of their students/practitioners who have) experienced Zen Sickness? If so, do you recall if their symptoms were psychological or physical or a combination?

10. Has there ever been a situation where you recommended (or have you heard of such a recommendation by a colleague) that a meditation student/practitioner take some time off from meditating in order to consult an outside counselor or medical professional? If so, please describe the conditions that prompted this recommendation.

11. If you were asked to write a brief description of Zen Sickness for a Zen dictionary, what would you write?

12. Are you aware of any steps you could take as a meditation teacher to prevent the occurrence of Zen Sickness in your students/practitioners?

13. In your opinion, the term 'Zen Sickness' is (circle all that apply):

    a. mythological
    b. too generalized to be meaningful
    c. a term that has many meanings
    d. a description of a physical condition
    e. a description of a psychological condition
    f. a description of a combination of physical and psychological symptoms
    g. a description of a kind of behavior wherein the student is obsessed with zen and everything zen-related
    h. an historical term found in zen literature but not easily applied to contemporary zen practice

14. Do you have any other reactions to the term 'Zen Sickness' that you would like to relate?

Please return the completed survey by October 15, 2009 using the postage-prepaid envelope provided, addressed to: Ler Nelson, . If you would prefer to complete and return the survey using a Word document, please e-mail Ler Nelson at: **Thank You for your participation in this educational research project. Your input is very much appreciated.**

Appendix B: Table of Terminology Equivalents

English	Chinese	Japanese	Sanskrit
Annihilation Sickness	Miè bìng	Senmetsu byō	-
Body of teachings expounded by the Buddha	Fǎ	Hō	Dharma
Buddha	Fó	Butsu, or Hotoke	Buddha
Buddha Nature	Fóxìng	Busshō	Buddha-dhatu
Ego	I	Jiga	Manas
Emptiness	K'ūng	Chuukuu, or kara, or arandou	Cûnyatâ, or Sûnyatâ
Enlightenment	Chiao, or pú tí, or wú	Bodai, or keihatsu, or keimou	Bodhi
Expedient means	Fāngbiàn	Hōben	Upâya
Lay ordination	Shòu jiè	Jukai	-
Meditation	Chán	Zen	Dhyana
Meditation Sickness	Chán Bìng	Zenbyō	-
Middle Way, avoidance of extremes	Zhōngdào	Chūdō	-
Mind	Hsīn	Kokoro, or seishin	Citta
Nirvana, Awakening	Nieh p'an, or jianxing, or wú	Satori, or Kenshō (first awakening)	-
One-pointed concentration, spiritual bliss	San mei, or ting	Kenshō	Samadhi
Private Interview with the Master	Dúcān	Dokusan, or Sanzen	-
Public Case	Gōng-àn	Kōan	-
Scriptures that use Buddhist teachings to systematically describe all worldly phenomena	Āpídámó	Abidatsuma	Abhidharma
Sitting Meditation	Zuòchán, or mòzhào chán	Zazen, or shikantaza	-
True words/talk given by a sanctioned teacher, during retreat or sesshin		Teishō	-
Unpleasant or distracting thoughts or illusions during zazen	Mo-jing	Makyō	-
Walking Meditation	Jīngxíng	Kinhin	-

Author's image